



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister

The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Religion, Science, and Syncretism”

© by Lee Reed

A reflection delivered on July 1, 2018

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

There is only one Self in all creatures. The One appears many, just as the moon appears many, reflected in water. The Self appears to change its location but does not, just as the air in a jar changes not when the jar is moved about. When the jar is broken, the air knows not; But the Self knows well when the body is shed. Amritabindu, Upanishad

*Humanity is not one thing and the world another; it has always been difficult for us to see that any organism is so embedded in its environment that the evolution of so complex and intelligent and creatures as humans could never have come to pass without a reciprocal evolution of the environment. An intelligent human argues, without any resort to supernaturalism, an intelligent universe. Alan Watts, *The Two Hands of God**

Reflection:

I have a word to share with you today: *syncretism*. You may know the word, but I didn't. Syncretism is the combining of different beliefs to assert an underlying unity in them. I think UUs are syncretists. Our principles assert our acceptance of different approaches to the spiritual life. We find an underlying unity to these approaches. Our choir celebrates our interdependence and common unity with various religions in song. Rev. Allison uses the stories of various religious faiths to illustrate our UU principles. This is *syncretism*, the showing of an underlying unity in widely varying belief systems.

Although the dictionary applies the term syncretism mostly to unification of religious and philosophical beliefs, I'm going to take the liberty of the speaker and apply the term not only to the beliefs and practices of various religions but also to science and its discoveries and conclusions. I will suggest that from both science and especially from the meditative practices of religion there is a syncretic conclusion to be drawn about the deepest concerns of our human lives, about who and what we are in the Universe. Both science and religion point to a profound unity in all of existence. Both say in essence, “That art thou. Whether you know it or not, you are it.

Let's begin by taking a look at science and some of its findings and conclusions about our common unity.

One of our UU principles concerns “interdependent web of all existence.” Science agrees wholeheartedly: Chemists and physicists tell us that the entire Universe, including ourselves, is made from common elements, elements like hydrogen, carbon, and iron that we all share, elements created at the beginning of the Universe or in the interiors of giant stars. Quantum physics analyzes these elements further into fields of probabilities. Your brain and its consciousness, thoughts, conceptions, and imaginings emerged, grew out of, the Universe. You are apertures through which the Universe sees itself. You are the Universe doing its thing. You may think of yourself and feel yourself to be something separate and apart from everything else, but science tells us this is not so. “We are the stuff of stars,” marvels one astronomer. “We are children of the Universe,” exclaims the Cambridge Encyclopedia of Astronomy.

When we move from the atomic and quantum levels to the biological level we find that science has discovered some further unifying aspects to all life on earth. Not only are we all unified at the atomic level, but we are also related at the biological, genetic level as well. Since the very beginning of life, life has flowed uninterrupted through the vessels of the genes. You are brother not only to the monkey but to the bacterium as well. For instance, although humans share 99.5% of our common human genes, we share between 96% and 98% of the genes of chimpanzees and bonobos.

But it's not only other primates we share common genes with. We share 90% of the genes of cats, something that those of you who are allowed to live with cats and to serve cats should have no doubt of. You cat people will be also happy to discover that whereas we share 90% of the genes of cats, it's only 82% with dogs.

Farmers share 80% of their genes with their cattle, something you might want to think about the next time you go to Burger King. 67% of mouse genes make you who you are. And so it goes: the fruit fly shares 60% of its genes with humans. Roundworms come in at 21% and common roadside weeds at 15%. You even share 7% of the genes of life with bacteria.

Speaking of bacteria, did you know that you have more bacterial cells in your body than the cells you call “human,” an estimated 39 trillion bacteria compared with only 30 trillion so-called human cells in the body.

And did you know that these bacteria not only play a role in your health, both positive and negative, but in your behavior as well? For instance, there is evidence that the bacterium which causes toxoplasmosis in your cat is present in the bodies of a high percentage of humans worldwide because of transmission from cats and that these bacteria reduce human inhibition as part of their genetic mission to further their transmission and reproduction. So, if your teenage child or grandchild is going out on a date and wants to take the cat along, you might stop and think about why.

The point is that the discoveries of science suggest that we are not principally isolated individuals struggling through life and fearing death, but are a living, conscious Universe expressing itself as it has continuously on this small Earth for billions of years. We are inextricably dependent upon, interrelated with, and unified chemically, biologically, and atomically with not only all other life but also all other existence, including our very awareness. As University of California psychiatrist Arthur Deikman concluded, “The awareness that each individual believes to be his own is, in fact, an awareness that extends throughout existence, for it is the organization of reality. . . . The sense that

my awareness is my own is due to mixing the sensations and thoughts, which are indeed personal, with awareness itself, which is universal. “

Then why don't most of us experience this universal awareness side of our common unity. Why do our personal sensations and thoughts so dominate us and reduce us to feeling alone and frequently fearful of life as well as death.

I have discussed before the Fellowship the view that it is our evolved capacity of human language that creates the illusion in us of separation, of non-unity. The primary characteristic of language making it different from an ACS, an "animal communication system", is that it facilitates what linguists call *displacement*. It enables us to communicate about things that are not present, things far away. Displacement enables us to conceive of and talk about events, also, that are not present in time: what happened yesterday and what might happen tomorrow, next week, next month. We can also communicate about imaginary things that are certainly not present, of unicorns and flying saucers. This characteristic of displacement is central to the special nature of human language, and although several apes, a parrot, and maybe some dolphins have been taught to use words in a rudimentary way, none has ever really used the special characteristic of language-- displacement--to communicate about things that happened yesterday or will happen in the midterm elections or to describe things that are imaginary.

Displacement allows us to stand apart from and to manipulate our environment. It is the basis for the developments of human culture. But it is a two edge sword because it has a very powerful psychological effect on our minds and is so potent in its effect that human language becomes not only a system of communication but of mental *perception*. We form a model of the world in our heads through language and perceive the world through this language-based model, but an unfortunate circumstance is that the language model has a very peculiar characteristic to it. The universe and thus the world--*this present moment*-- happens all at once, but through our language-based model, we do not perceive it that way.

Using language, we can only divide the world into parts and think about each part as though we are separate from it, whereas actually the world, the Universe, and we are whole cloth. A primary characteristic of language sentences is that of the subject acting on or being acted on objects of the predicate and this structure imposes its dynamic on our minds, a bead stringing view of reality, one thing after another. We describe the world as "me in here and it out there," and in doing so always separate ourselves from everything else that is. Intellectually, we may know that things--including ourselves--are interconnected in a quite interdependent wholeness or unity, but perceptually and emotionally, the displacement characteristic of language and sentence structure itself makes us feel separate from our home in the Universe.

Furthermore, we talk to ourselves, constantly, incessantly. In so doing we separate ourselves not only from the rest of the world, but from our deepest reality. We identify ourselves with our words and sentences separating ourselves from our deepest self, our inmost nature. This is what language does in a very profound psychological way. We come to know the world through a process of division and separation. What we call "*human* consciousness" that forms the "self" is thus mostly the representations of the little language voice in our heads.

You may be thinking about now, well, what about religion. What does religion have to offer regarding this evolutionary two-edged sword of language, two edged because it not only enables us to manipulate our environment and bring our complex human culture into being but it also separates us from our deepest reality in the Universe.

A brief digression here about religion: Traditionally, religion has been both a profound social ordering institution and a therapy for helping us experience some sort of meaning and resolution about who we are, about our existence in this life. Most of us in the Fellowship come from a Judeo-Christian background. The religion of our forebears taught that we were the children of a personal God who was external to us--up in Heaven--and that we achieved salvation through loving God with all our hearts. Most of the focus of our religious background, however, came from the do's and don'ts of the social ordering side of religion and much less of it from the empirical results in our lives of prayer, meditation, and selfless good works, which is what I understand to be the practical path to "loving God with all our hearts."

Many of us reject our traditional religious backgrounds, which seem anti-scientific, myth-wrought, and focused predominantly on social ordering. I think we are mistaken, however, to reject the significant meaning of prayer and meditation in our lives. I believe that it is prayer and meditation that will pierce through what amounts to an illusion of separation from the Universe. In Judeo-Christian religious terms this separation has been termed a falling from Paradise or from a realized union with God. But you should not allow the beliefs of your forebears in a personal, social ordering deity to capture all of the meaning of the word "God" for you, for God may also be conceived as the "awareness that extends throughout existence."

What do the most meditative and prayerful practitioners in world religions say about our language-derived separation from our Universe and its cure? I suggest briefly four principal points.

First, religions (and I'm only dealing here with the big four – Judeo- Christian tradition, Islam, Buddhism, and the Vedanta of the Hindu Indian religion), religions have all identified that there is a problem with the way we exist in the world. A Buddhist says, "Every evil deed, every example of heartlessness in the world, stems directly from this false sense of "me" as distinct from everything else. (--Bhante Henepola Gunaratana). A Christian writes, "The tragedy is that our [language-based] consciousness is totally alienated from the inmost ground of our identity. And in Christian mystical tradition, this inner split and alienation is the real meaning of "original sin." (-- Thomas Merton). From the Svetasvatara Upanishad of the Vedantic tradition, "The truth is that you are always united with God. But you must *know* this. Nothing further is there to know. " In other words, the problem is that we do not experience our absolute and inextricable unity with God, with the ultimate truth of existence.

More subtle, but just as numerous, are the references in all the religious traditions to the harmful effects of language-based thinking and conceptualization on spiritual attainment. Jesus admonished against being verbally long-winded in prayer and advised to pray to God "who is in secret." An enlightened Buddhist teacher observed that if one could "drop all arbitrary concepts," conceptual thinking being entirely language derived, one would immediately become a Buddha.

Second, religions all say that the cure, the resolution, the therapy for what ails our separation from God takes place inside us. This cure is not external to us. Says the Sufi mystic poet Rumi: “I looked into my own heart. In that place I saw true reality. It was in no other place.”

Observes Jesus in Luke 17:21: “You cannot tell by observation when the kingdom of God comes. There will be no saying, look here it is or there it is; for in fact the kingdom of God is within you.” And as St. Thomas Aquinas so powerfully put it, “Great is the blindness and exceeding the folly of many souls that are ever seeking God, continuously sighing after God, and frequently desiring God whilst, all the time, they are themselves the tabernacles of the living God .”

Third, religions say that what is inside us, i.e., our minds, contain not only our personal sensations and thoughts, but also the realization, the participation in an infinitely greater realization of unity with what is often called “God” in religious language but which, I suggest, is universal awareness. The mind contains both personal sensations and thoughts **and** an awareness that extends throughout the Universe.

About personal sensations and thoughts and universal awareness, the Vedantic tradition says, “Like two birds of golden plumage, inseparable companions, the individual self and the immortal Self are perched on the branches of the selfsame tree. The former tastes of the sweet and bitter fruits of the tree; the latter tasting of neither, calmly observes. The individual self, deluded by forgetfulness of his identity with the divine Self, bewildered by his ego, grieves and is sad. But when he recognizes the worshipful Lord as his own true Self, and beholds his glory, he grieves no more.” (-- Mundaka Upanishad)

Preached the Christian bishop Meister Eckhart: “You must observe two things about yourself that our Lord also had to deal with. He, too, had higher and lower powers, each having its own function. By his higher powers, he possessed and enjoyed the bliss of eternity while, at the same time, by his lower powers he went through much suffering and struggle here on earth, and still this did not inhibit the function of the higher powers. So it should be with you. Your higher faculties should be trained on God, offered up to him and consecrated to him at all times.”

A similar admonition from St. Paul in the book of Romans: “Those who live on the level of our lower nature have their outlook formed by it, and that spells death; but those who live on the level of the spirit have the spiritual outlook, and that is life and peace.” (-Paul in Romans 8:5-6)

And from the Buddhist teacher Ashvagosha, who lived around the time of Jesus: “The mind has two doors from which issue its activities. One leads to a realization of the mind’s pure essence [which is always with you], the other leads to the differentiations of appearing and disappearing, of life and death.”

The fourth point that religions offer to support our interdependent unity with existence is the approach to resolving the problem presented by the nature of our human language and the perception of separation it engenders. This resolution arises from direct experience engendered by meditation or prayer which focuses attention away from the language-based voice in our heads. Maintains the Islamic Sufi Hazrat Juniad, “Whoever repeats the Name of the Lord, the Name merges with him, and the Name merges into the Lord.”

The Christian Patriarch Callistus advocates for “ ceaseless prayer. . . to call upon the Name of God always, whether a man is conversing, or sitting down, or walking or making something, or eating, whatever he may be doing, in all places and at all times, to call upon God's name.” (--Patriarch Callistus, quoted in *The Way of a Pilgrim*, translator R. M. . French)

In the Vedantic repetition of the sacred syllable “Om,” in Buddhist meditation following of the breath, in focusing on mantras and mandalas, in repeating the Prayer of Jesus, in counting the rosary, and in innumerable other forms of meditation and prayer, religious practice seeks to pierce through the language-based illusion of separation and isolation and open our minds to the reality of interconnection and unity until, as the Bible says, we can see God not through a glass darkly but face-to-face, until, as the Christian bishop Meister Eckhart exclaimed, “The Eye with which I see God is the same Eye with which God sees me.” Perhaps the Zen Buddhist teacher Yatsutani described it most pointedly: “The inner realization . . . is the realization that you and the universe are not two. . . . [It is] the direct awareness that you are more than this puny body or limited mind. Stated negatively, it is the realization that the universe is not external to you. Positively, it is experiencing the universe as yourself.”

For Unitarian Universalists, the scientific insights into the unity of all life, of all reality, should be consoling to us in our language-based thinking and rationality, but we should also take to heart meditative practices traditionally associated with religions. The direct experience of interdependence and unity these religious practices can bring mesh well with the conclusions of scientific knowledge about what we are in the Universe. That is syncretism.

Words of Going Forth: The writer Joyce Carol Oates observes, “In surrendering one's [language-based] isolation, one does not surrender his own uniqueness; he only surrenders his isolation. It is time for psychology to take very seriously the propositions advanced by all the great mystics -- that the "self" is part of a larger reservoir of energy, call it any name you like. As long as the myth of separate and competitive "selves" endures, we will have a society obsessed with adolescent ideas of being superior, of conquering, of destroying. The pronoun "I" is as much a metaphor as "schizophrenia" and it has undergone the same "metaphor-into-myth" process.”

The Vedantic salutation “Namaste.” references not only a simple greeting or parting but also a recognition in others of the unity that we all share, call that unity “God,” the awareness of the Universe, or whatever you will. This salutation is especially appropriate today. So, “Namaste.”