

Coming Home Spiritually to More Than One Faith

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I continued to feel drawn to Buddhism

After more than forty years of wondering, I discovered a spiritual home in Judaism and Buddhism. Although raised a Methodist, I never felt fully at home in Methodism or any form of Christianity. I fell in love with both Judaism and Buddhism while teaching world religions toward the end of my academic career.

Despite my attraction to both traditions, at one time I assumed that I needed to decide between them. After much reflection I chose to convert to (Reform) Judaism and went through a year-long process that involved study, attendance of religious services, performance of rituals, a monthly conversation with the directing rabbi, and finally a *beit din* (a kind of religious examination by three rabbis) immediately followed by the final conversion ritual: immersion in a *mikvah* (ritual bath).

After my conversion to Judaism, I continued to feel drawn to Buddhism – like someone newly married who finds himself still powerfully attracted to a former lover. I tried at first to ignore these feelings and to convince myself that I needed to leave Buddhism behind. My continuing attraction to Buddhism felt like a form of religious infidelity – because the Jewish tradition calls for Jews to say twice a day the words *Shma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adona ehad* (one translation: “Hear Israel, the Eternal is Our God, the Eternal Alone.”) This is typically understood as the affirmation of a lifelong covenant that involves a vow to be faithful to the God of Sinai. The *Shma* vow is often compared to a marriage vow – and so practicing another religion can be interpreted as a form of spiritual adultery.

An article in *Interreligious Insight* by Charles Burack, titled “Integral Spirituality”, convinced me that I did not need to leave Buddhism behind or feel guilty for practicing two religions. If I could view Judaism and Buddhism as different manifestations of the same Ultimate, there would be no need to accuse myself of spiritual infidelity. Burack’s affirmation of “integral spirituality” – the practice of integrating two or more traditions – was liberating. He offered a pluralistic solution to my dilemma:

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The integral path is a wondrous way of worshipping “The Multi-Faced Unity”. Many integral practitioners experience the different religions as diverse expressions of an underlying divine wisdom. Moreover, they see all peoples, all species, all beings as unique and united offspring of The One.¹

By embracing the idea that the Sacred is a “Multi-Faced Unity”, I came to understand Judaism and Buddhism as two different ways of experiencing the same Reality. A skeptic might of course reasonably doubt that Judaism and Buddhism are expressions of the same Ultimate. After all, these two faiths,

as traditionally understood, appear to assert conflicting views of reality: one gives us a linear view of time under the direction of a personal God while the other gives us a cyclical view of time governed by impersonal law of karma.

Indeed, these religions, in their traditional forms, appear to give incompatible accounts about how we as “selves” came to be and where we are (or should be) headed. For one tradition the self is divinely created and potentially eternal (as indicated in the Jewish prayer book by the recurring phrase “resurrection of the dead”); for the other tradition the self is a karmically generated insubstantial bundle (as indicated in Buddhist scripture by the word “nirvana,” understood as dissolution of the bundle). How, it may be asked, can I sincerely believe in and practice incompatible religious worldviews?

Despite what looks like a problem of spiritual coherence, I find Burack’s notion of integral spirituality the best way to describe my spiritual disposition. I have come to see myself as bi-religious: indeed, I have become convinced that a denial of this would be a denial of my spiritual integrity. I have concluded that the Sacred is beyond concepts and words, even though words and concepts remain the necessary vehicle through which we express our spiritual life. I affirm that, despite differences in words and concepts, Judaism and Buddhism are expressions of the same Reality.

I have been able to weave both Judaism and Buddhism into my life in way that is deeply satisfying. Rather than feeling torn, I feel at peace. I attend

synagogue services and say Hebrew prayers (in which various words for God occur frequently) and benedictions (which are typically expressions of gratitude to God). I also engage in Buddhist practices – meditation, mudras, and mantras – which make no reference to a Creator and have nothing to do with expressing gratitude to God. At a late age, I have found spiritual fulfillment in the practice of two religions whose traditional adherents seem worlds apart in their understanding of what the *Ultimate* is and what *we are* in relationship to It.

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How can anyone plausibly assert that Jews and Buddhists worship the same Reality? The answer lies in a willingness to see religions from a pluralistic perspective. The fact is that many liberal Jews, despite the language of Jewish prayer, do not literally believe in either a transcendent God (in a divine person) or in a permanent self (in resurrection of the dead or immortality of the soul). And clearly there are many liberal Buddhists who do not take the notions of karma and rebirth literally. Religious liberals, regardless of their particular faith, tend to be religious pluralists, construing the language of their religious

tradition in metaphorical rather than literal terms. Thus, although the conceptual framework and terminology of different world religions may be very different, a non-literal understanding of religious language helps to soften these differences. According to pluralism, religions are different ways that finite and imperfect minds approach the same Sacred One – a Reality that can never be fully captured by words or concepts.

The practice of integral spirituality – understood as choosing and living out two or more religions – is something for which there is no clear guidance. Burack, a Jew by birth who combines Jewish, Sufi, and Hindu elements in his integral practice, writes about the challenges individuals face in attempting to achieve integral spirituality: for example, whether to keep the practices separate or somehow fuse them, and how to respond to the puzzlement and even hostility of even people who believe in the value of interfaith dialogue.²

My view is that the multi-faith person can only say to a perplexed uni-faith person: “My religious needs are peculiar and plural: one religion alone, no matter what the denomination, does not fulfill my spiritual longings.” People who are spiritually inclined are usually pulled in one of two directions: either toward a view of the Ultimate as a Supreme Person with whom they can have a relationship of mutual love, or toward a view of the Ultimate as an Impersonal Reality, union with which brings an ineffable peace. There are, however, some of us who are pulled in both directions.

Jewish star; photo, Cetta Kenney

Moreover, since there is no single way to live out integral spirituality, each multi-faith individual must struggle to find an integral practice that works for her or him. Some may create a hybrid spirituality, uniting various elements from two or more religions in a fused practice. Others may want to keep religions distinct, separating spiritual practices by alternating them. Some may want to experiment with these two different forms of a multi-faith life to see which is most satisfying.

My integral spiritual practice involves alternating rather than fusing spiritual paths. On different days I live out different religious narratives. On Jewish days I see the world theistically; on Buddhist days, non-theistically. I am able to alternate my perception of the world, seeing the world through different religious lenses on different days. To uni-faith types, this may appear incoherent; to me it is a spiritually fulfilling.

When adopting a Jewish worldview, taking direction from the prayer book I imagine that I was once a slave in Egypt, someone freed from slavery by the mysterious power of the Divine. I also understand myself as someone called by God to free others from oppression (whether social or psychological). I see myself as someone who was at Sinai when the law was given to Moses – the law that instructs Jews to welcome the stranger, free the captive, clothe the naked, etc. (The Talmud tells us that the souls of all Jews, including converts, were present at Sinai.) The Jewish narrative, with its linear view of time as having a beginning, a middle, and an end, provides me, during these times, with a Jewish way of interpreting my life and the cosmos. On Jewish days, the words of the Torah motivate me to practice compassion and pursue justice. The Torah that morally inspires me is of course always the Torah as I interpret it.

On Jewish days I open myself to theism. In Judaism there is no single prescribed way of understanding God. Jews are encouraged to work out their own theology. Reform Jews speak of the God of Abraham, the God of Sarah, the God of Isaac, the God of Rebecca etc., recognizing that even the Jewish patriarchs and matriarchs may have had very different views of the nature of God. Judaism has historically been and remains theologically pluralistic.

Although I am constantly rethinking what it means to utter the word God, I often construe theism in terms of Martin Buber's idea that the Ultimate is a Thou with Whom I can have a



Buddhist wheel; original art, Lonnie Hanzon

relationship of person to Person (self to Self).³ This means conceiving the Ultimate as a cosmic (eternal) Person Who seeks to have a loving relationship with the world and intends for human beings to live in loving relationship not only with the Divine Self but also with all of creation. I cannot, however, given the nature and extent of suffering in the world, bring myself to believe that the deity is omnipotent. I can at best believe in a God who suffers with the world and intends good without having the power to bring about the good. On this view, called limited theism, it is up to human beings to repair the world and to usher in a messianic age in which justice and compassion will be triumphant. God, from this perspective, depends on human beings for the realization of the good that God inspires us to pursue.⁴

On other days, I rise from bed a Buddhist, striving throughout the day to be fully awake, and to see my life through the very different narrative of the life and teachings of the Buddha,

born Siddhartha. I start a Buddhist day by meditating on my breath, and then on the four noble truths and the eight-fold path. I imagine, working with the ideas of rebirth and karma, that I have been every kind of sentient being that has ever existed: this worldview makes me more sensitive to all suffering, animal as well as human, and motivates me to compassionate and wise living, following the Dharma as I understand it.

On these days, I live without any notion of God (eternal Self): rather I occupy a world characterized by dukkha (unease), anica (impermanence), anata (no-self), and the potential of nirvana (liberation)--always recognizing that these fundamental Buddhist concepts are open to a variety of interpretations. Just as, on Jewish days I am constantly rethinking the idea of God and the meaning of Judaism, so on Buddhist days I am constantly rethinking what it means to lead a Buddhist life. On these days, I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha as I provisionally interpret them, and I repeat the bodhisattva vows that express an aspiration to liberate all sentient beings, to relieve all such beings of their afflictions, to master all wisdom practices, and to achieve enlightenment only after I have aided others in doing so.⁵

Although I never combine these two practices, I recognize important points of intersection. Both religions welcome skepticism: each has a history of encouraging rather than discouraging questions. Both religions affirm the importance of universal loving kindness and compassion, including the endorse-



Mezuzah; photo, Cetta Kenney

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ment of an active concern for animal as well as human suffering. Both religions facilitate mindfulness: Buddhism calls, via mindfulness practices, for me to be aware of what I am doing as I am doing it; Judaism calls, via benedictions, for me to feel gratitude for everything that I enjoy and have.

Alternating spiritual practices, while constantly rethinking the meaning of each, keeps me from having fixed religious views, from settling into only one way of religiously experiencing and seeing the world, or even one way of understanding each religious worldview. I must admit, however, that there have been times when I felt that the religion I was practicing on a particular day was all I needed, tempting me, for the sake of philosophical coherence and spiritual continuity, to abandon the other. That is, I have been tempted, in order to avoid the jolt of having constantly to alter my practice and perception, to limit myself to a single path. This especially has been a temptation during times when I have felt extraordinary peace with a particular path. The temptation was to simplify my spiritual life by resolving to have only one religious practice.

When, however, I have attempted to continue on one spiritual path to the exclusion of the other, whether Judaism or Buddhism, rather than alternate them, I have eventually experienced a profound deficiency: I have felt that something spiritually important was missing in my life. This recurring realization has convinced me that, whatever the needs of others, I have a need, no matter how jolting it may sometimes be, to live a

multi-faith life – and, more specifically, to practice both Judaism and Buddhism. So, through experimentation, I have discovered that neither alone satisfies my peculiar spiritual needs.

I am actually able, without great difficulty, to radically shift my way of perceiving and experiencing the world – choosing to see life, on different days, through the lenses of different sacred narratives. I am able to live, for a chosen period of time, as if the worldview I am practicing is true. No matter how paradoxical it may seem I am also able spiritually to see – in a kind of meta-vision – that these two religions are ultimately two different ways of experiencing the same Sacred Reality, of which, on my view, nothing can be directly known. To use Burack’s language, the Ultimate is a “Multi-Faced Unity”: this of course means that Judaism and Buddhism present us with only two of many faces of the Divine. Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Taoism, Jainism, etc. are other faces. A face takes the form of a particular mythical narrative along with a unique set of ritual practices.

I am able, despite my training as a philosopher, to accept the deeply paradoxical nature of the Sacred, its multiple and seemingly contradictory manifestations. I understand the language of the different religions to be largely figurative. From my pluralistic meta-perspective, nothing in the sacred literature of Buddhism or Judaism literally describes the Ultimate. This is very much in keeping with the pluralism of John Hick, a British philosopher who argues that the Ultimate in-itself can never be known

directly but can only be grasped within a conceptual framework that reflects a particular culture and the idiosyncratic needs of particular individuals. Each religion can be viewed, according to Hick, as a true myth.⁶

Pluralists in different religions should be able say to each other: “The conviction that my religion is true does not mean that yours is false.” But how can this be? According to Hick, the answer lies in the recognition that religious language is not literally true: “the significance of myths lies in their presentational power rather than in uttering truths which cannot be otherwise.”⁷ They allow us to live within a

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Buddhist prayer: photo, Cetta Kenney



sacred vision that, at its best, is self-transformative, taking us out of our ordinary self-centeredness into an other-oriented more compassionate life. To be able to recognize a religious worldview as a true myth requires that we transcend binary thinking that limits us to the restricted alternatives of straight fact and straight fiction.⁸

A pluralist, from this point of view, must be able to dwell within her religious worldview while being aware of its mythical character. Can one really continue to live within a view while giving up the claim that it is the absolute truth? Pluralists – whether their practice is uni-faith or multi-faith – must answer this question affirmatively. The alternative to absolute truth is true myth: truth expressed in language that the believer recognizes to be perspectival, figurative, and poetic. I do this whenever I adopt a particular practice. I am able to dwell within a Jewish perspective while recognizing it is not the last word, but only a framework of metaphors expressing the Sacred in a Jewish way, words that never literally capture its essence. I do the same while abiding in Buddhism.

But this is not the end of my multi-faith story. What profoundly enriches my practice of these two religions, and brings home their differences, is participation in two very different spiritual communities. I am an active member of a Reform synagogue and am also a member of a small non-denominational Buddhist sangha. By participating in two separate spiritual communities I am able to enjoy the uniqueness of each and to experience their peculiar group dynamics. The people in each community seem

to me very different and I value these differences. Moreover, no one in either community has made me feel uncomfortable about living a double life. In one community I vow fidelity to the God of Sinai and to a covenant people; in the other I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Both communities are clearly committed, in their own ways, to the liberation of humanity. Their differences require me to wrestle with the question of what it means to be liberated and to liberate others. For me the Buddhist and Jewish notions of liberation are ultimately complementary and mutually enriching.

Participation in two separate religious communities feels right for me in a way I never knew was possible. Where I live I am the only member of either community who is a member of both. I am able to share with each community what I have found in the other – and to be an ambassador from one community to the other.

CONCLUSION

For many years I thought of myself as a spiritual freak and had given up the idea of finding a spiritual home because I had a difficult time choosing between two different spiritual paths, both a radical departure from my birth religion. I want to thank Charles Burack and Interreligious Insight for enabling me to more easily accept my multi-faith orientation. Burack showed me not only how to accept my bi-spirituality but also gave me the courage to be open about it: to come out of the closet. As I

have opened up about my bi-religiosity, I have found an increasing number of people in my community who also identify as multi-faith individuals.

The notion that it is necessary to choose one faith may be an Abrahamic prejudice, something that Jews, Christians, and Muslims have uncritically taken as a given. In Asian cultures it is not considered odd for people to claim that there are members of more than one religion: for example to be a Buddhist and a Confucian, a Confucian and a Taoist, etc. As John Berthrong states in *The Divine Deli*: “From the East Asian perspective, religions complement each other in the cultivation of human flourishing and proper relationship to divine things.”⁹

It has become clear to me that my story of spiritual homelessness and final spiritual homecoming is not that unusual: there are clearly many individuals who, like me, do not feel that they spiritually belong to their birth religion. They, like me, may have a temperament that makes it impossible to gain fulfillment in the worldview they have inherited. At least some of these spiritually dissatisfied individuals may also be multi-spiritual types who simply need to realize that a multi-faith life is possible. We are entering a period in which people in the West are beginning to learn what many in East Asia have long known: that a life can be profoundly enriched by multiple religious practices.

NOTES

1. Charles Burack, “Facing the Challenges of Integral Spirituality”, *Interreligious Insight*

3, January 2005, p. 56.

2. Charles Burack, “Overcoming the Fear of Mixing Faiths”, *Interreligious Insight* 5, July 2007, p. 20.

3. This perspective is sometimes called relational theology. See Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970. See especially Buber’s “Afterword”, pp. 171-182.

4. This view of course implies that God requires redemption, a view that runs counter to traditional or normative Judaism.

5. In saying these vows I place myself within the Mahayana tradition, although I do not adhere to any particular denomination of this tradition.

6. John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm*, Oxford: One World, 1999, p. 233.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 230.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

9. John H. Berthrong, *The Divine Deli*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999, p. 42.

The road home: photo, Cetta Kenney

