

Overcoming the Fear of Mixing Faiths

CHARLES BURACK

Several years ago, I attended an annual interfaith gathering in Northern California. Nearly a thousand people came to hear a panel of local religious leaders representing Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Each of the leaders offered words of wisdom and peace. I was impressed by their open-heartedness and sincere desire to understand and appreciate other faiths. When the audience was invited to ask questions, the leaders gave thoughtful and respectful responses. About twenty minutes into this dialogue, I decided to ask a question I was struggling with in my heart: “What is your view of someone whose spiritual path is informed by more than one religious tradition?” The question was addressed to the entire panel.

What followed utterly shocked me. One speaker after another launched into an attack on that multifaith “someone.” Though each leader answered the question

Dr. Charles Burack teaches literature, spirituality and creativity at St. Mary's College, UC Berkeley, and John F. Kennedy University. A widely published writer and award-winning scholar, he is author of two books: D. H. Lawrence's Language of Sacred Experience (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) and Songs to My Beloved (Sacred Arts, 2004). He is actively involved in interfaith education, arts, counseling, and chaplaincy and can be reached at www.charlesburack.com.

Interfaith Altar, Gauges Michigan; photo, Cetta Kenney



differently, the general picture painted was that such a person was probably confused, superficial, and/or egocentric. The tone of the responses was not polite. In some cases, it bordered on dismissive or aggressive.

I was stunned by the responses. Though I hadn't named myself as the "someone", I in fact had been on an integrative spiritual path since the early 1990s, so I found it hard not to take the responses personally. It was obvious to me that all of these leaders

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were highly intelligent and caring people and that all truly believed in the value of interfaith dialogue, so why would they be so disturbed by, even hostile to, the idea that someone might integrate two or more traditions he or she cherished? At the time, I was fairly new to the interfaith movement and hadn't realized there was a huge divide between those who espouse interfaith dialogue and those who personally integrate spiritual insights and practices from two or more religions.

What was even more surprising was what took place after the official question and answer session. Hurt and shaken by the responses, I decided to speak with each of the leaders to get a

fuller explanation of their remarks. First, I spoke with the rabbi. In a soft voice, he confided that he was actually very sympathetic toward my question and was sure that most of the audience was sympathetic too. However, because he was a congregational rabbi, he could not publicly affirm a path that integrated more than one faith. If he were to do so, he would be criticized by the Conservative movement and by his own congregation for advocating a less than Jewish life. His tone was caring and compassionate, very unlike his public remarks.

Next, I spoke with the Muslim minister, who was a Sufi. She too expressed real sympathy toward me and my question and admitted that she had been studying Kabbalah for quite some time. She emphasized that this was her personal practice and that she didn't want to speak about it publicly. She also said she made a distinction between studying others' scriptures and following their customs and practices. This seemed like an odd distinction to me since studying Kabbalistic texts is a central Kabbalistic practice! Though I wanted to speak to the other leaders who responded to my question, they were either surrounded by questioners or had left the room by the time I had finished my conversation with the Sufi minister.

In the years since this event, I have continued to find this divide between those who affirm interfaith dialogue yet insist on a strict separation of traditions and those who affirm a more open and integrative approach that does not adhere to strict traditional boundaries and does not

preclude the sharing of practices and approaches. Last year, I was considering getting more involved in one or two of the local interfaith councils. I called several council directors to get their impressions of the work they do. One prominent director emphasized that he avoided using the word “unity” at his center because he didn’t want to convey the impression that the faiths are fundamentally one or that they should be striving for oneness. Rather, he believed it was important to

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emphasize that the faiths are different, distinct, and separate yet capable of finding or creating “common ground.” Not knowing that I was on an integrative path, he warned me against “those people” who were trying to “make up” their own religion based on unity. This time, I was not surprised by the negative response to an integrative path, but it still made me feel a little sad.

In a previous essay entitled “Facing the Challenges of Integral Spirituality” (*Interreligious Insight*, July 2004), I addressed the valid concerns that an integrative path could lead to a confused, superficial, or egocentric spiritual life. I discussed the importance of spiritual discernment, spiritual companionship, and spiritual community in ensuring that an integral path is honest, authentic,

deep, and truly integrative. What I would like to examine in the remainder of this essay is the strong fear of mixing faiths that I find in most traditions and denominations, even the most liberal ones. I want to both honor and challenge that fear.

A NEW NATIONAL AND GLOBAL TREND

Researchers have shown that more and more Americans are beginning to draw on more than one religious tradition to shape their spiritual lives. This trend may in fact become more global as electronic communications allow greater sharing among diverse peoples and cultures and as an ethic of religious pluralism becomes more widespread. Some of these integral practitioners have also turned to the sciences, humanities, and arts for wisdom, inspiration, and transformative techniques. Most practitioners are faced with the challenge of creating a deep, coherent, and integrative spiritual life from these richly diverse sources. Besides the personal challenge of learning how to weave an authentic integral path, there is the larger social challenge of how to relate to religious communities who oppose the borrowing and mixing of religious traditions. Indeed, some traditionalists have claimed that integrative practitioners steal and misuse their beliefs and practices.

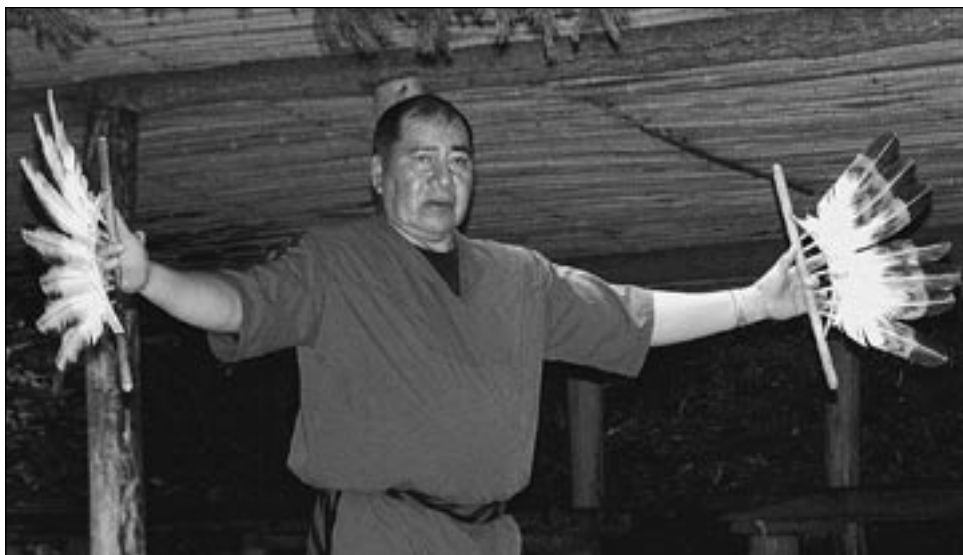
My spiritual path is rooted in mystical Judaism and significantly informed by Buddhism. I am also involved in various Sufi, Hindu, and Christian communities and have incorporated many practices

and teachings from them. My wife was born Catholic, and in her thirties was initiated as a Sufi. She too is deeply connected to Buddhism and is a lover of Indian philosophy, culture, and art. I have been exploring various traditions for almost two decades but only began calling my path “integral” or “interfaith” in the last decade. In the mid-1990s, I decided to devote my professional life to interfaith and integrative work. I am a professor,

and spirituality, I do not consider myself a Wilberian and am not here specifically addressing his unique approach to integralism. Rather, I am addressing the wide range of approaches to an integrative spiritual life.

Most integral practitioners I know are aware that while some people condone their integrative practice, many condemn or criticize it. It is a painful paradox that those who strive to

Native American Prayer, photo, Cetta Kenney



counselor, writer, and interfaith chaplain who teaches integrative approaches to literature, writing, spirituality, psychology, and work. As a spiritual counselor trained at the Spiritual Directors Institute (run by the Sisters of Mercy), I work with many individuals committed to an interfaith or integral path. Much of my writing is devoted to exploring and expressing the pearls and perils of integral living. While I have been influenced by Ken Wilber’s integral approach to psychology

be most inclusive are often excluded by those who are more parochial in their orientation. I am reminded of Mahatma Gandhi, who was gunned down by a Hindu fundamentalist, and of Malcolm X, who was assassinated by a Black Muslim. Integral practitioners are sometimes seen as interlopers, dilltantes, or appropriators – or simply as confused and misguided eccentrics. Fortunately, many of the practitioners I know in the San Francisco Bay Area feel

comfortable and welcome in a variety of churches, synagogues, mosques, and ashrams. Generally, the degree of comfort and welcome is a function of the fit between the personality of the integral practitioner and the “personality” of the particular religious community.

Integral living is a fairly easy matter in the Bay Area and in some of the progressive West Coast cities like Seattle, Portland, and Los Angeles. Boulder too

communities is one of the great challenges that integral practitioners face.

LEGITIMATE FEARS AND CONCERNS

It is understandable that many religious communities feel threatened by individuals who “borrow” various practices and beliefs from them. Most communities believe that their sacred practices should be performed with appropriate intention, knowledge, and communal support. Many of the rituals and ceremonies have been developed over hundreds or thousands of years and are meant to be performed not only within the context of the community but within the larger context of their ancestors. Taking a practice out of its traditional context changes its meaning and power. Some would argue that such borrowings are sacrilegious, even psychospiritually dangerous.

It is especially understandable that many indigenous cultures oppose and feel threatened by the “appropriation” of their religious practices. Many have experienced oppression and exploitation at the hands of Europeans and Americans. For many Native Americans, it is a terrible irony that those who sought to convert them and wipe out their traditions are now thronging to their sweat lodges and starting their own sweat lodge businesses. While some “Anglos” have developed vision quests and sweat lodges that have real integrity, others have commercially exploited these native traditions.

But it should be emphasized that exploitation is by no means limited to those who appropriate and degrade



Tibetan Prayer, photo, Steven J. Freedman

is a center of integral living partly because of the presence of Ken Wilber’s Integral Institute. It is not an easy matter to live an integral life in many other regions of the country. I have students who live in the South, East, and Midwest – and in other countries – and feel lonely in their integral outlook and approach. Their more traditional or conservative friends often don’t understand or appreciate their openness and inclusiveness. Integration with more traditional faith

others' spiritual traditions. Many religious traditionalists are also guilty of commercially exploiting their own spiritual heritage. There is surely no shortage of TV and radio shows that blatantly sell religious messages and merchandise.

There can also be no question that borrowing and mixing traditions is potentially dangerous and damaging. There is always the potential for abuse and misuse. Such integrative activities require a high level of personal integrity, discernment, and knowledge. I believe that the integral practitioner is

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obliged to become as informed as possible about the meanings, procedures, and uses of every practice that he or she wishes to borrow and integrate. Ideally, the practitioner should receive the permission, guidance, and support of the community from which the practice is borrowed. The practitioner then needs to treat the practice with respect and reverence and to realize that taking the practice out of context will somewhat alter its meaning and effect. If a community refuses to permit the practitioner to use their practice, then the practitioner must engage in a deep discernment process – through prayer, meditation, and dialogue – to determine if Spirit is still calling him or her to take on the practice anyway.

LETTING GO OF SPIRITUAL POSSESSIVENESS

Interfaith borrowing and sharing would be less problematic if religious communities were to understand their spiritual practices as not theirs, but God's. I believe that spiritual practices are transformational tools that divinity gives to humanity. They are gifts to all of humanity, not just gifts to a particular people or lineage. At various points in human history, particular peoples are especially open and ready to receive particular tools and be their stewards. But as time passes, other peoples and individuals also become ready to receive and work with these transformational tools – and at times to transform or integrate the tools and adapt them to new purposes. Ultimately, the tools, like the universe itself, belong to the giver (God/dess), not to the receivers (human beings). Moreover, history reveals unequivocally that rituals, ceremonies, and other spiritual practices and sacred objects have all undergone evolution within any given tradition. Forms of prayer evolve over time, as do initiation rites and ritual objects and other religious practices. Spirit itself is evolving through this process of historical change.

MOST FAITHS ARE HYBRIDS

Furthermore, when we investigate the history of religions, we see that in fact faith communities have always borrowed beliefs and practices from one another and that almost no religious tradition has remained entirely insulated from exchanges with other tradi-



Tapestry; original art, Lonnie Hanzon

tions. *Symbols and ceremonies, as well as liturgies and theologies, continually migrate between religions and are adapted to new purposes and peoples.*

Nearly every tradition is a hybrid. This hybridity need not be considered an “adulteration” or “contamination”; rather, in many cases, it reflects the fundamental interwovenness, the essential communion and co-creation, of beings. It reflects, in short, the oneness of the universe.

Why should a practice temporarily insulated and isolated from others be “better” than a practice found to be transformative for many peoples? Why must faith communities become territorial and possessive about their spiritual discoveries? Why do we have to treat our discoveries as private property or

spiritual capital? True, the special devotion and wisdom that a particular people invests in developing and sustaining a practice needs to be respected. And respect should be given to the complex ways in which that practice is inter-related to the people’s entire way of life – it is one patch of a vast tapestry. But why should spiritual practices in effect be copyrighted or trademarked in perpetuity? Why should others be prevented or discouraged (or, God forbid, cursed) from using them, benefiting from them, altering or adapting them?

If a Chasidic prayer can bring a Hindu closer to God, why should Chasids and Hindus object? Would God/dess object? A traditional answer to this last question might be “yes”. But if we look deeply into our own

souls and address the question to the Infinite Source of Being, rather than to the God of Abraham, or to the God of Muhammad, or to the God of Patanjali, we may get a different response. My soul tells me that the Supreme Source simply desires that we live in deep at-onement with It, and that at-one-ment can be achieved through denominational, hybrid, or newly created spiritual paths. As various integral thinkers have said – from Sri Aurobindo to Father Bede Griffiths to Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi – many different paths all take us to the mountaintop.

Is it really wrong or blasphemous for a Hindu to experience the Chasidic prayer in new ways and to assign new meanings?

Will the Chasidic prayer chanted by a Hindu have a different meaning or experience than the same prayer chanted by a Chasid? Probably yes. But it is also true that two Chasids will likely have different prayer experiences and may even assign different meanings to those experiences. Why should we be so insistent about circumscribing and standardizing the experiences and felt meanings of individuals? Religious traditions generally define and delimit the range of “acceptable” experiences and meanings. Yet it is also a historical fact that within most religious traditions, we find changing definitions of what is a “legitimate” or “true” or “holy” belief, practice, or experience. What

one generation condemns as heretical may be affirmed as essential by a subsequent generation. Just consider all of the banned theologians – like Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart – who were sainted centuries later.

Is it really wrong or blasphemous for a Hindu to experience the Chasidic prayer in new ways and to assign new meanings? Couldn't this be understood as “mining” the meanings and expanding the transfigurative powers of the practice rather than adulterating them? According to the rabbinic tradition, every word in the Torah has 70 meanings!

The common objection is that “if you don't do the practice in the ways prescribed by our tradition, then it won't work or may even produce negative effects. God will punish you for misusing the practice.” Shouldn't this objection be tested? Maybe it is based on ignorance, superstition, or lack of experience. Perhaps, if we allowed the spirit of holy experimentation to enter our spiritual life, we would discover that many variations and improvisations – and many hybrids – are effective in connecting us deeply and authentically to God.

Certainly, variations, improvisations, and hybrids play a central role in my spiritual path. Why should I feel guilty for blending and extending practices? Doesn't Judaism contain many Near Eastern “pagan” practices and ideas that have been transformed by their integration into a new monotheistic outlook? Isn't Christianity largely a blend of Judaic and Greco-Roman traditions, all integrated within a new Christological context? Doesn't Buddhism build on a

largely Hindu base? Don't the Mahayana Buddhists extend many of the practices of the Theravadan Buddhists?

PREOCCUPATION WITH PURITY

Why are we so afraid to acknowledge that our traditions, our lives, are as much borrowed as given or grown? Why are we so afraid to acknowledge that our ways of living are composite, interpenetrating, intermixed? Why such preoccupation with “purity”? There have been and continue to be many groups preoccupied with religious, racial, and cultural purity. Some of the more extreme groups have wanted to destroy anyone or anything that was “impure” – that is, anyone or anything that appeared to be other than what the group members imagined themselves to be. Such ideas of purity are illusory because they deny the essential interconnectedness and interpenetration of being. The cosmologists tell us that we are all made mostly of stardust!

This preoccupation with purity – often framed as “us vs. them” – is not limited to extremist groups. In lesser or greater degrees, it seems to be present in

many human groups. I believe that every group – religious, political, cultural, racial, gender, economic, or otherwise – needs to become mindful of its tendency to become exclusive, possessive, and insular and to see itself as superior to “others”. Further, each group needs to resist this dualistic tendency with awareness, wisdom, compassion, and genuine – and repeated – attempts to connect with others.

WE ARE ALREADY CONNECTED

At the deepest level, we are already connected. What an integral approach does is to make explicit the deep web, the intimate weave, of connection and to make those connections more conscious, powerful, harmonious, creative, and mutually beneficial – as well as more joyful and alive! When we refuse to reach out to other faiths, we are resisting the full articulation and integration of The One. And we are contributing to the ongoing strife and violence of human history. Why not link arms and hearts and work with, rather than against, the exfoliation and diversification of the divine Unity? Why not choose life?

Connected; photo, Cetta Kenney

