

**DRAFT**  
**“Plundering” the East: UUs and Eastern Religion, Then and Now**  
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**I: Introduction**

The intensity of the reaction to Jeff Wilson’s “Cultural Appropriation as Unitarian-Universalist Practice” as part of a Unitarian Universalist panel – “Religious Liberalism, Politics, and Empire: Resistance and Complicity” – at last year’s AAR convention in Chicago and attended by members of Collegium indicates just how sensitive this topic is and how much many of us have embraced non-Christian religions, particularly those from the East. Wilson accused UUs of creating a religious identity out of “bits and pieces of other peoples’ cultures” and argued that this example of religious appropriation constitutes “a Unitarian practice since the time of the Transcendentalists.” These are serious charges. While the tone of his address was unnecessarily provocative, the questions he raised are shared by other UUs and therefore require a careful and thoughtful response.

**II: The Religious Appropriation Critique**

Because there has been some confusion over nomenclature, I would like to briefly discuss “cultural appropriation.” In almost all cases, from economics to music to culture, appropriation refers to the borrowing or theft of property, whether it be land, song lyrics, or forms of cultural expression. Appropriation comes from the Latin verb

*appropriare*, meaning "to make one's own," indicating that it need not refer to theft or even borrowing; referring to religious beliefs and practices as property raises serious questions, which will be raised in a latter section of this paper. UU critics of appropriation often fail to properly distinguish between cultural appropriation and religious appropriation, nor do they always refer to the historical context that is integral to understanding how appropriation is transformed from the act of simply making something one's own to theft. The UUA includes a section on its website titled "Cultural (Mis)Appropriation," indicating that it understands, at least, the complexity of the term. Critics, however, often use the terms interchangeably

In 1995, Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley published her article "Cornrows, Kwanzaa and Confusion: The Dilemma of Cultural Racism and Misappropriation" in the *Journal of Liberal Religious Education*, setting in motion criticism from several quarters of examples of UU cultural and religious appropriation. She focuses her essay on the UU practice of reproducing various religious and cultural celebrations in UU churches, from the Passover Seder to Kwanzaa. The problem, as she sees it, lies in power relationships:

We lack depth . . . in our understanding of the historical, racial, cultural and religious context, as well as sensitivity to these contexts. At worst, our approach is assimilation, a combination of voyeurism and thievery, which in effect seems to say: from the distance of time and space, we have

permission to take a myopic look at whatever culture we choose, and to beg, borrow or steal whatever we like, and make it our own.

Jeff Wilson, in his presentation, makes similar arguments against appropriation, but he goes much farther. Instead of limiting his critique to specific examples of wayward practices, he argues that “to be a Unitarian-Universalist means to heroically forge your own religious identity out of bits and pieces of other peoples’ cultures” and that “[c]ultural appropriation has been a Unitarian practice since the time of the Transcendentalists, who cheerfully plundered Persian, Indian, Chinese, and other sources.” For Wilson, it is through appropriation that UU theology is created. The reasons for this, he explains, are the “lack of defining doctrinal content and its attendant Christian practices,” which “has left a vacuum that most UUs now fill with elements from religions that are not a natural part of our heritage.” Much of Wilson’s and Bowens-Wheatley’s argument can be described as critiques of imperialism, as both identify the theft of cultural and religious “property” against those with less power. Much of what the UUA and UU ministers such as Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley object to are acts of “conquest” concerning cultural practices that originate within communities that have actually been colonized, especially those of American Indians and African Americans.

The editor of the *UU World*, Christopher L. Walton, in his essay “Unitarianism and Early American Interest in Hinduism,” provides a more specific critique against

religious appropriation specifically. He suggests, by way of an example, that the inclusion of Hindu texts in our hymnal – *Singing the Living Tradition* -- is a problem. There, you will find a traditional Hindu hymn, a poem by Rabindranath Tagore, and responsive readings taken from Hindu scriptures. The problem with this, Walton argues is that “the Unitarian traditional mistakes certain aspects of each religion as invariably more significant than other aspects – emphasizing ethical dimensions over the liturgical, ritual, or cosmological dimensions – without regard for the evaluative views of practitioners of those religions” (14). The critique of religious appropriation, then, focuses on three areas: the use of non-Christian religious texts as *sources*, how religious material is used, and the obligations of new users to be sensitive to a religious source’s context and significance.

### **III: Response to the Critique of Religious Appropriation**

#### **A: Religious Texts and Practices as Property<sup>1</sup>**

Cultural appropriation, as defined by Wilson and Bowens-Wheatley, is understood within the framework of property rights and both of them use the language of ownership and consumption to make their case. Wilson argues, for example, that UUs “consume others’ religions,” “rifle through others’ traditions in search of spiritual gold,” and that Zoroastrianism “*belongs* to a persecuted Indian minority” (emphasis added). Bowens-Wheatley refers to cultural appropriation as a form of “plagiarism”

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Rev Jeanne Pupke for first raising the issue of religious sources as property with me in a private conversation.

existing within the “free marketplace of ideas.” This framework is important because it remains the dominant paradigm, a paradigm Wilson and Bowens-Wheatley appear to have extended to the transmission of religious beliefs and practices. By using the language of imperialist critique, Wilson appears to be arguing that just as Europeans “plundered” lands occupied by American Indians, so the Transcendentalists “plundered” the religions of the East.

To identify religious sources as property belonging to a specific community is fraught with several problems. First, some of the practices to which critics object are part of cultures historically exploited by Europeans. As a result of the history of European conquest in the Americas, it makes sense to object to the use of elements of Indian religious ritual. The same cannot be said, however, of a UU Buddhist meditation group or the inclusion of a Rabindranath Tagore poem in our hymnal. Tagore enjoyed an important relationship with Unitarians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and Buddhist meditation is promoted by Buddhist monks and nuns from around the world throughout the United States.

Secondly, there are dangers in viewing religious texts and sources as property. The Transcendentalists, in fact, have much to teach us about what Lawrence Buell calls “detrribalization,” a practice in which religion is no longer the territory or domain of its original practitioners. In one of his later lectures, Emerson cautions us not to “assail Christianity, or Judaism, or Buddhism, or the Koran,” but to “frankly thank each for

every brave and just sentence . . . they have furnished,” as “approximations” pointing to the “identity” of “every inspiration.” For Emerson, religion is not property, cannot be owned, and therefore cannot be stolen.

## **B. Sources of Religious Texts and Practices**

Wilson, in his paper, makes that argument that engaging with Sufi poetry, Hindi hymns, and Buddhist texts means engaging with “religions that are not a natural part of our heritage, especially ancient and modern Paganism, Buddhism, and mystics of more orthodox traditions such as Islam and Catholicism.” This passage is laden with a number of false assumptions – that Christianity is our natural inheritance; that paganism, Buddhism, and mysticism are alien; that we best stick to our own kind. This is not my experience of Unitarian Universalism, a faith community in which I was raised beginning at age 9 and in which I have been a member for 41 years. My background is not Christian and this is true of many, many UUs for whom Christianity or any religion is foreign. To assume that Christianity is our only acceptable source for religious wisdom is to deny the very principles that bind our denomination together. Three of our seven principles embrace “spiritual growth,” the “search for truth and meaning,” and “the interdependent web of all existence.” These principles *call us* to embrace the sacred texts outside of our own individual, congregational, and institutional framework if we are to grow and search. Nor do I understand Wilson’s charge that non-Christian religions are not a “natural part of our heritage.” If

Unitarians and Universalists since Joseph Priestly's comparison of Judaism and Hinduism have explored the religions of the world is not that part of my natural inheritance as a UU?

### **C. Uses of Religious Texts and Practices**

Finally, all three critiques appear to agree that there exists a moral obligation on the part of new practitioners to ensure that their use of religious texts or practices is aligned as closely as possible with the original. Walton suggests, for example, that it is improper for UUs to emphasize only certain aspects of other religions, their ethical dimensions rather than their liturgical or cosmological dimensions, for example. Religions of all kinds have spread across land and sea and they have done so in a variety of ways, often through the integration of new practices into pre-existing practices. When Persian missionaries spread Christianity to China in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, that new religion was integrated into existing Taoist and Buddhist rhetoric and paradigms. The Ten Commandments were transformed into the Ten Covenants and the Gospels became the Sutras.

This is how religion moves and changes around the globe. Several years ago the Dalai Lama was asked by a reporter if he thought that American Buddhism had been corrupted. His Holiness responded that not only was he not surprised – Buddhism is different in every country in which it exists – but that it was not his place to comment on or object to the course of Buddhism in America, that this was for

Americans to decide. Although no theory of religious transmission exists, this is an important issue for UUs because it goes to the heart of who we are and where we came from. Unitarian Universalism has been frustrating to plot in any linear fashion, having surfaced, receded, and re-surfaced in any number of places and guises. Americans UUs are quite unlike Hungarian Unitarians or those in India and Kenya. To insist that we incorporate a religious practice such as a *seder* by duplicating all elements of the original – ethical, ritual, liturgical, and cosmological – not only poses practical challenges (to whom exactly would we go to reproduce these elements), but limits the power of religion to bridge and connect. If I am able to benefit from and enable others to benefit from its ethical dimensions, that brings all of us closer together.

#### **D: The Transcendentalists' Use of Religious Texts**

To suggest, as Wilson has, that the Transcendentalists “cheerfully plundered Persian, Indian, Chinese, and other sources” is to misunderstand both Transcendentalism and the fluidity with which religions cross boundaries and are understood by different people in different times and regions. The Unitarian interest in Eastern religion, however, precedes the Transcendentalists. Joseph Priestley published his *Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with those of the Hindoos and other Ancient Nations* in 1799. The first American publication of a Sanskrit translation appeared in 1805 in *The Monthly Anthology and Boston Review*, which was edited by Ralph Waldo Emerson's father, William.

Much has been written about the breadth and depth of the Transcendentalist interest in the religions of the East. My purpose here is not to recount that interest but to focus on the nature of it, in order to demonstrate that it was no passing fancy but was integral to how Emerson and Thoreau engaged with the world and its sacred texts.

The *Bhagavad Gita* was central to Thoreau's experience at Walden Pond and within the narrative of *Walden*. According to David T.Y. Ch'en, he was also influenced by Taoism and had access to a French translation of the *Tao Te Ching* and the later Taoist Chuang-tzu. He translated a fragment of the *Lotus Sutra* from the French and refers repeatedly to "my Buddha" in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. As Rick Fields argues in *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*, "Thoreau was a pre-Buddhist," who "forecast an American Buddhism by the nature of his contemplation" (62). Thoreau saw in the religious texts he studied a repository from which we achieve spiritual growth. "Every sacred book, successively," writes Thoreau in his journals, "has been accepted in the faith that it was to be the final resting-place of the sojourning soul; but after it was but a caravansary which supplied refreshment to the traveler, and directed him farther on his way to Ispahan and Baghdat" (68). For the Transcendentalists, sacred texts were part of the spiritual journey, neither owned nor occupied.

Emerson's interest in Eastern religion stems from his own theological evolution. In his "Divinity School Address," delivered in 1838, Emerson defines the "religious

sentiment” as “our highest happiness,” “creates all forms of worship,” and “dwelled always deepest in the minds of men in the devout and contemplative East.” Emerson saw Jesus as a member of the “true race of prophets” who understood the “mystery of the soul.” For Christians, however, Jesus’ “truth” had been replaced by “[t]he idioms of his language, and the figures of his rhetoric,” and Christian churches had been built, not “on his principles, but on his tropes.” Christianity, he argued, “dwells with noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus.” For Emerson, what was most important about any religion was its interest in and practice of this “mystery of the soul.” Emerson saw in Jesus what he saw in the teachings of the Buddha and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Emerson saw his own ideas reflected in the Eastern sacred texts he encountered. Emerson noticed, for example, the similarities between his idea of the Over-Soul and the Hindu idea of the Eternal Self (*paramatman*):

The highest object of their [the Hindus] religion [is] to restore that bond by which their own self (atman) [is] linked to the Eternal Self (paramatman) i.e. Over-Soul; to recover that unity which had been clouded and obscured by the magical illusions of reality, by the so-called Maia of Creation (quoted in Versluis 66).

Lawrence Buell, in his essay “Emerson’s Significance for the Twenty-First Century,” argues that Emerson was also suspicious of the “merely personal” and for this reasons, it is easy to see why Eastern religion would have appealed to Emerson. In

one of his early lectures, Emerson objects to the notion of a personal God, to the idea that “absolute truth, absolute goodness must leave their infinity and take form for us.”

The Transcendentalist interest in Eastern religion was by no means shallow or superficial. Emerson and Thoreau both *lived* what they read among the great sacred texts of India and China and integrated what they understood about them into their own sense of “the mystery of the soul.”

#### **IV: Spiritual Materialism**

My response to the critique of religious appropriation is not intended to suggest that there are not problems inherent in our engagement with new religions, but to suggest that this is a problem specifically among UUs, emanating from our creedlessness and hazy understanding of our own history remains unconvincing, given the large numbers of Americans who are similarly engaged with Eastern religion. In fact, much of what both Wilson and Bowens-Wheatley object to about UU practice of non-Christian religion is the superficiality of *some* of that engagement and that has been addressed by numerous writers. Chogyam Trungpa’s important book *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism* identified an important challenge to those of us interested in new religious approaches. He identified “spiritual materialism” as a shallow attempt to engage in spiritual practices: “We go through the motions, make the appropriate gestures, but we really do not want to sacrifice any part of our way of life” (13).

Elizabeth Lesser, in her book *The New American Spirituality: A Seeker’s Guide*, similarly

warns that “spiritual materialism is lurking in the shadows of democracy, individuality, and diversity,” and that individual practitioners turn complex religious beliefs into “simple slogans” and “misinterpret spiritual freedom as psychological self-indulgence” (56). I suspect that it is this spiritual materialism that bothers Wilson most.

Elizabeth Lesser, in *The New American Spirituality*, cautions spiritual seekers. Rather than challenging the engagement with new religions *ipso facto*, she offers suggestions for how to engage wisely and thoughtfully. This is prudent advice and the Transcendentalists, ironically enough, provide us with some guideposts. We must engage deeply and widely. The Transcendentalists read numerous sacred texts from non-Christian traditions repeatedly and over the course of a lifetime. These texts became the source for contemplation and they wrote about these experiences in their journals. The Transcendentalists serve as a role model for authentic engagement with unfamiliar religious ideas and practices. Many UUs follow the path the Transcendentalists paved in their exploration of Eastern religion, using the tools the Transcendentalists themselves used – contemplation, reading, writing, nature, conversation. For them, this is no shallow interest, neither then or now.

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