

## **Of Faith and Justice**

**By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD February 18, 2024**

What is true faith – the fundamental core to the religions of the world? What did Jesus profess but love for the marginalized, what did the Buddha enact but compassion for universal suffering, what did Moses offer followers but a profession of faith and freedom? These are religious truths, enacted through deeds and words and teachings reflected in ancient sacred texts. Isaiah 1:17 of the Hebrew Bible professes, “Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.” *Maha Upanishad* 6.72 in Hinduism asserts: “Only small [people] discriminate saying: One is a relative; the other is a stranger. For those who live magnanimously the entire world constitutes but [one] family.” The core and foundation of faith is love and service.

Often, we may not notice the profound impact faith has in our lives and our communities and our nations and our world. Woven into the fabric of society, our worldviews, our meaning making, our values are shaped and formed often subconsciously and at times with intentional lessons and teachings. And while these ancient texts profess a universal and unconditional benevolence, their power has been skewed and manipulated into professions of social hierarchy, racism, slavery, misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia, in stark contrast to and as such pivotal in the discussion of this month’s theme of Justice and Equity. Today, we explore. And today, we further reconnect with a faith that at its core serves to reorient our place in this world steeped in love and compassion – Unitarian Universalism. But first, the misinterpretations.

We begin with an exploration of Hinduism in India – knowing that the damaging impacts of faith are not at all unique to this country and this religion. Traditionally, the Hindu faith in India has perpetuated a detrimental caste system, rigid and violent at its core. This engrained inherent unworthiness was pronounced sacred and holy, worked into the very origin story of

human existence. One interpretation tells that that before the age of human awareness, the all-knowing Brama became “grandfather of all the worlds.” And he created the divisions between the beings of this world, formed from his body parts, lowest to highest, bottom to top. Shudra – the servant, of his feet. The Brahmin – the philosopher and sage – his head. And layers of divisions within. Unmentioned are the untouchables, those deemed vial – their very shadows a pollutant – outside any caste and thus on the very bottom rungs of society later to become known as the Dalits. Through interpretations of scripture, divine word, and faith origins, Caste became divinely sanctioned – as levels of power and powerlessness, wealth and poverty, dignity and dishonor, respect and disdain, formed – rationalizing and perpetuating oppression, violence, poverty, and control.<sup>1</sup> (Caste) 101-102

Interpretations of the book of Genesis promoted and rationalized slavery in this country we call home and around the world. As the scripture dictates, Noah was the owner and caretaker of a great vineyard with three sons. One night the wine overtook him, and he lay “uncovered in his tent.” Noah’s son Ham, soon to be father of Canaan, found and laid eyes upon his naked father. He relayed his father’s state to his two brothers who covered Noah’s body without seeing his nakedness. When Noah awoke and found what Ham had done, he cursed Ham and Canaan and all of their decedents to the horrors of slavery. In subsequent centuries, biblical scholars would describe Ham as one with black skin and thus his descendants would be those with dark skin as well. As such, the biblical passage would be used to justify violence and dehumanization of Ham’s descendants, the narrative used to justify the stealing, murdering, and enslavement of millions of captives from the continent of Africa throughout the world. Through the story of Ham, slavery became divinely sanctioned.<sup>2</sup>

And so, we see these destructive discrepancies between the loving and caring words of scripture and the detrimental interpretations of these ancient tales. I minored in Religious Studies while receiving my undergraduate degree in my home state of New Jersey. Of great

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<sup>1</sup> *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents* by Isabel Wilkerson pgs. 101-102

<sup>2</sup> Ibid 102-103

impact in my studies and my world view was that of hermeneutics – finding different ways of interpreting the Bible. Remember that word, hermeneutics. I learned that one can study the bible and intentionally find passages that may be interpreted as homophobic, racist, misogynistic, hierarchical – any sort of hate or -ism that one would like to find. And as such, these atrocities theoretically become sanctioned by God. And yet, we also have the opportunity – and the need – to interpret with love, compassion, empathy, and justice which, to me, is true faith. I truly believe that these texts are those of love – all we need to do is look at the lives and actions of the world’s ancient faith leaders; all we need to do is connect to the Great mystery, the spirit of love and life, the source of all that is, and know we have come in contact with sacred and unconditional love. That is faith. That is what is sacred within and beyond. This is held in scripture and story, and likewise in theology.

I want step back for a moment and turn to the theology of Calvinism since this has such a great impact on this country’s culture – historically in the horrors of slavery as well as the genocide of indigenous peoples, and the after affects which linger today in poverty and racism. Calvinism taught that there is no free will, and that certain adherents are “called” by God as one of the “elect” to be saved in Heaven, while others are inherently and arbitrarily damned. Salvation in this Christian theology has nothing to do with action, and everything to do with God’s will. While there was no concrete way of knowing who was among the elect, adherents speculated and formed hierarchical means of assuming who was saved and who was damned. Outward good fortune, particularly wealth, was a sign of being among the saved “elect.” Conversely, poverty, as well as dark skin, were evidence of divine damnation. Colonizers and slave owners become “predestined to virtue,” while slaves and indigenous peoples were profane and damned. We see this to the detriment of thousands of slaves and indigenous peoples throughout our country’s history.<sup>3</sup> I argue that it is culturally relevant to this day, even in those who never prescribed to the Calvinist theology; it is woven into the very fabric of our society. How much easier and justifiable is racism if the victim is already damned and deemed unworthy, and the victor is one of God’s chosen people? I see this bleeding into sexism,

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<sup>3</sup> *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz pg. 49

homophobia, classism. Victim damned, victor saved. Can you see why a hermeneutics of love is so important?

Let us reflect on the words of American priest and author Father Richard Rohr, whose teachings we heard earlier. Rohr writes of the bible validating, not those on the top of this socially constructed hierarchy, but on the bottom. Who is chosen by God, he asks, but the “rejected sons, barren women, sinners, lepers, [the] outsiders”? I see this in direct contrast to Calvinism, to the interpretation of the story of Ham or the origin story of Hinduism, and any other tale that perpetuates oppression. These ideas may traditionally be seen as counterintuitive, those who are nearest to God and thus chosen by God are the outcasts, those on the fringes of society, suffering unjustly. This is found over and over and over again – hermeneutics of love and compassion. It is woven throughout the parables of Jesus. Father Rohr calls this a revolutionary interpretation of the Gospels, reflecting on how disrupting this biblical hierarchy redefines religion and society at its core – it dismantles systems of oppression. He lifted up what he defines – what I define – as the lies scholars have attributed to the bible as well as the truths of the bible. As a tool of oppression, religion defends conformity, a commitment to the status quo, triumphalism, and clerical privilege. As a tool of love, religion highlights the suffering of the masses, the word of truth, as well as charity and compassion.<sup>4</sup> There are liberal Hindu interpretations of their faith’s origin stories – ones that lift up love and compassion, not a justification for hate. There have been great acts of justice performed by the Hindu people, for example the nonviolent revolution of Mahatma Gandhi, a man who worked towards civil rights, working peacefully, and successfully, for freedom. Blessings be upon him.

May we explore our own faith. Universalism was created as a faith in stark contrast to Calvinism, preaching universal salvation as a response to predestination. Unitarianism lifted up inherent human goodness in contrast to depravity. God became an unceasing, indiscriminating entity of love. Both faiths offered different ways of engaging with the world and her children, demanding of us justice and equity as we realize society’s inherent worth and

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<sup>4</sup> From “Stories from the Bottom,” Center of Action and Contemplation

interdependence. Neither faith has been near perfect in living out her values – Unitarians were both abolitionists and slave holders. Yet, if we take a look at Unitarian Universalist teachings through the lens of love, we have a faith that can guide followers into lives of compassion and meaning. I challenge us to live these life-giving tenets of our faith.

I note here that early Unitarians and Universalists understood God in traditionally Christian ways that many of us have since abandoned. But we can still relate to this idea of divine unconditional love and a preference for the marginalized. Both faiths also used the term “God” when referring to the sacred, so I do as well.

William Ellery Channing, our namesake and an influential early Unitarian, offered a sermon entitled “Likeness to God,” which I find applicable to this morning’s reflections. Channing asserted that true religion exists for each being on this gentle earth to grow in likeness to God – for each of us to become more loving and compassionate, tending to every sibling in our midst. Not a damning God, not a God who is parent to divinely sanctioned hierarchies, but one of equity and compassion. Channing claimed we carry within us the perfections from which the universe sprung: “beauty, magnificence, order, benevolent adaptations, and boundless purpose.” We are in sympathy with all that is. Let us reflect on a direct quote from Channing’s sermon, “creation is a birth and shining forth of the Divine Mind, a work through which [God’s] spirit breathes.” This loving God is within and among all living things, from flower to stars. In all things – the wisdom and love found in suffering and temptation. This is the goal of the Unitarian faith, and directly reflects the justice work we are called to bring to the world, for within us, and within all of those who surround us, there is a likeness to God.<sup>5</sup>

Father of Universalism Hosea Ballou offers his reflections in his work entitled *A Treatise of Atonement* Ballou draws a distinction between what he terms an “angry God” and a “loving God.” Humanity’s punishment from what is termed “infinite sin” draws on a relationship with an angry God. In contrast, Ballou saw individuals as working and struggling each day towards

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<sup>5</sup> “Likeness to God” William Ellery Channing

moral goodness and kindness, interacting, instead, with a loving God. He offered unique reflections on Jesus as well. In Ballou's faith, Jesus' death on the cross was not an atonement for sin nor to appease an angry God, but, I quote, "Christ's death released a great spirit of love into the world." Individuals who were receptive to this eternal and enduring loving spirit of Jesus were pulled in relationship with a loving God. A God of justice.<sup>6</sup> Ballou's most famous theology is this: no sin was too great not to be divinely forgiven; salvation is universal. As mentioned earlier, this radical theology was a direct response from the arbitrary damnation of Calvinism. No one would reside within the depths of hell. A hermeneutics of love.

And so, beloveds, we have faith and theology, and realize its fundamental impact on the world around us, whether subconsciously or directly. This matters. How we interpret faith and scripture matters. We have what were believed to be divinely blessed hierarchies, slavery, damnation, and violence, perpetuated from a hermeneutics of anger, hate, and power. Yes. Injustice. Inequity. And yet, dear ones, and yet. We have hermeneutics of love, compassion, and, yes, equity, and justice. We have scripture that brings divine love to the world in each of our days and to each being on this fragile earth. So may this be our theology, our faith, our guiding light in an often-aching world. We are beings of love whose sacred is the same, whether an entity in the sky or the caterpillar on a budding rose. We are, and have been, a faith of love and compassion. So may we be, and love, and grow in likeness to God.

May it be so, and Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> *A Treatise of Atonement* by Hosea Ballou