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“A Faith That Changed the World: The Brahmo Samaj”

The Rev. Heather Janules

Sometimes it is not easy, being part of a faith tradition that few people know about or understand. I imagine I am not the only Unitarian Universalist minister who, when strangers in the grocery store or a doctor’s waiting room discover your vocation, either apologize for swearing, start professing a love of Jesus or both. I imagine I am not the only long-time Unitarian Universalist who is often asked “What is that?” when we name our religious affiliation or, by the inquirer’s response, we know they have confused Unitarian Universalism for the Unification church.

Perhaps for these reasons, Unitarian Universalists have developed a practice of crafting “elevator speeches,” short explanations of their beliefs that can be shared in the time it takes to travel from one floor to another in an elevator. Some of them are serious:

At its best, Unitarian Universalism is a religion of people who covenant to treat one another well, care for the earth, and protect the beautiful tapestry of cultures and communities that make up the people of the world. Love is the core value from which we build.¹

Some of them are pithy: “Unitarian Universalism means never having to say, ‘I’m right, you’re wrong!’² and “Unitarianism proclaims that we spring from a common source; Universalism, that we share a common destiny.

Some are pithy *and* humorous: “We are the ‘one God, no Hell’ church.”³

As a member of a faith small in number, I am somewhat envious of the great traditions, recognized or even understood by outsiders. I am not Muslim but I know what it means to go to Mecca. I am not Jewish but I know what it means to sit Shiva. By their number, their influence on human history, their crackerjack marketing team or all of the above, some faiths have a presence in the human consciousness beyond their adherents.

¹ <https://www.uuabookstore.org/Assets/PDFs/3104.pdf>

² <http://archive.uuworld.org/2003/06/affirmations.html>

³ From the Rev. Meg Barnhouse

So imagine when I learned there is what some call “a Unitarian form of Hinduism” – I was surprised and delighted. How wonderful it was to discover that my minority spirituality was articulated and practiced long ago, in a distant and different culture, a place that still has many believers today. It was wonderful to find out that Unitarian Universalism has a small home within the great and diverse Hindu faith.

I am speaking of the Brahmo Samaj, a “monotheistic reformist movement” of Hinduism, founded in 1828 by Ram Mohan Roy and Debendranath Tagore. If the name Tagore sounds familiar, Debendranath is the father of beloved, Nobel prize-winning poet Rabindranath Tagore, whose lyrical words often reflect the principles and ideals of the Brahmo community (as “Samaj” means “community” in India.) I wanted to learn more about the Brahmo Samaj, a curiosity that led to today’s service.

In my exploration, I was first challenged by an obvious question: If Unitarian Universalism is the “one god, no Hell church” and Hinduism is known for its many gods, how can there be a Unitarian expression of Hinduism? Perhaps it is time for a Brahmo Samaj elevator speech, made – in part – through a demonstration:

Imagine this glass of water is the Hindu god Brahma, the creator
And this water is Shiva the destroyer
And this water is Ganesha the remover of obstacles
And this water is Krishna
And this is the God of Jewish and Christian scripture
And this is all of humanity
And this is all of nature

As we learned in today’s First Reflection, the Brahmos teach us that all manifestations of the divine, including human beings, are of the same essence.

Thus, the Brahmo Samaj articulates their “prime principles” – on God, being and love - as:

There is always Infinite Singularity - immanent and transcendent Singular Author and Preserver of Existence - He who is manifest everywhere and in everything, in the fire and in the water, in the smallest plant to the mightiest oak.

Being is created from Singularity. Being is renewed to Singularity. Being exists to be one (again) with Loving Singularity.

Respect all creations and beings but never venerate them for only Singularity can be loved.⁴

The Brahma Samaj has a rich and complex history. The movement began with Ram Mohan Roy, born in 1772. He was an amazing scholar, becoming fluent in Sanskrit, Persian and English and conversant in Arabic, Latin and Greek. As historian Alan Hodder notes, "Roy's intensive study under his Muslim tutors of the Qu'an and the Sufi poets nurtured in him and abiding respect for the Muslim *tawhid*, the absolute Unity of God, which would become the cornerstone of his mature religious philosophy and the basis for his critiques of Hindu 'idolatry' and later, trinitarianism."⁵

Roy connected with a Baptist missionary to India, William Carey. Roy's affiliation with Carey and the Baptist church was a catalyst to challenging the priestly classes of Indian society, the practice of sati - widows throwing themselves, or being thrown, upon the funeral pyre of their husbands – child marriage, dowries and polygamy. In time, Roy ended his relationship with Carey as he could no longer promote the idea of a trinitarian God. In the midst of theological conflicts with trinitarian colleagues, Unitarian contemporaries of Roy in England and the United States became philosophical allies with Roy.⁶ His break from traditional Hinduism and disassociation with trinitarian Christianity became pronounced with the founding of the Brahma Sabha on August 20th, 1828 with Devendranath Tagore, the first house of worship opening in 1830.

After Roy's death, Devendranath Tagore became its primary leader, eventually publishing a Brahma Dharma book in 1850 that defined the tradition as separate from Hinduism, a unique religion unto itself, and challenged the infallibility of the Hindu Vedas.

The movement then splits, thanks to the interference of a Unitarian minister, Charles Dall. The contemporary website for the World Brahma Council tells the story this way: "Dall, a roving Unitarian missionary, is in a troubled marriage in Boston with...Caroline Wells Healey Dall, suffering a series of mental depressions,

⁴ <http://true.brahmosamaj.in/brahmo-prime-principles.html>

⁵ https://www.jstor.org/stable/30227561?read-now=1&seq=4#page_scan_tab_contents

⁶ [ibid](#)

and is sufficiently persuaded to grant his wife a Boston divorce by sailing to India forever as the first foreign Unitarian missionary.”⁷

No matter what motivated Dall to come to India, his connections with the Brahmo Samaj were positive until he began to introduce works by Unitarian Christians. Alienating both orthodox Christians and Tagore, who did not welcome discussion of Christianity, Tagore then banned Dall from the Samaj. Now ostracized, Dall began a Samaj of his own with progressive members of the Brahmo Samaj, the Rammohun Roy Society. This separate group eventually split again and, in time, one half of the divided group reintegrated with the original Samaj. Speaking to the question of excommunication, the World Brahmo Council concludes “In the early days of Brahmoism a few people were admitted as members who caused immense trouble to our religion and gave it a bad name, after their expulsion in 1866 True Brahmoism has had no apostasy in its ranks.”⁸

Currently, while Brahmoism is considered a religion, Brahmos no longer gather in congregations. The original Samaj no longer holds worship services while the more liberal break off tradition worships about twice a year. Yet, it is believed that the original Samaj has eight million members while other branches claim thousands of adherents. One can identify solely as a Brahmo or – as in Unitarian Universalism – one can practice another faith while also claiming a Brahmo identity. The Brahmo World Council affirms that Brahmos do not evangelize: “Brahmoism was never a ‘proselytizing religion.’ Like all the great Asian religions, we sit on the seashore (or a Himalayan mountain or the Internet) and wait for truthseekers to seek us out.”⁹

In the most succinct possible terms, one could say that the Brahmo Samaj is a “one god, no Hell” community that does not convert but invites people into its movement. Brahmos draw from their principles of universal human dignity, affirmation of reason and belief in religious freedom to transform society for the better.

Despite the dubious social skills of a certain Charles Dall many years ago, one could say there is strong resonance between the Principles and practices of Unitarian Universalism and the Brahmo Samaj. One could say these ideas are not confined to small, unknown traditions but instead shared across cultures and continents. One could say that Brahmo and Unitarian ideals and adherents have

⁷ <http://true.brahmosamaj.in/brahmo-time-line.html>

⁸ <http://true.brahmosamaj.in/brahmo-faq.html>

⁹⁹ [Ibid](#)

changed the world throughout history and that these principles are still needed this day.

Swati Mukherjee

In the 1980s Calcutta was a very vibrant city to grow up in and I consider myself fortunate to be part of a cultural, crowded yet somehow functional city on the eastern shore of India. I am the first woman in my family who had held a job (this is counting the past generation – from my grandfather's mother to my mother). There are few individuals shaped my identity when I was growing up during the early years of my life be it in my grandparents' house near the pristine backwaters of the Bay of Bengal or in my parents' house in the chaotic city. I was a daughter from a Hindu family who was sent to catholic school, and this school was in a predominantly Islamic neighborhood of the city. Seeing several ways to preach and call God baffled me as a child, especially when I would bring the bible from school and ask why is the Veda or Gita a different holy scripture – are they both holy? Why did we have a guru (living god) yet when my mother taught me about karma and rebirth she talked about Shiva, Krishna or the women power Kali who can protect us.

In my sixth-grade history class I was introduced to an entity called the Brahmo Samaj: Raja Ram Mohan Roy, along with Dwarkanath Tagore founded the Brahmo Samaj, an important socio-religious reform movement in the state of West Bengal in the year 1828. Dwarkanath Tagore is the grandfather of the Nobel prize winner poet and writer, Rabindranath Tagore, as Rev Heather mentioned. The society aimed to start a movement to reform the Hindu religion that primarily based it's believes on the existence of one God. Growing up in a Hindu family the key to our worship has been several deities as idols or pictures, customs and rituals – for example the one particularly close to my heart is nothing to eat or drink on your wedding day. You can imagine, my husband being an agnostic – it was a tough wedding day for me, and if I tried to reason with my family they would always try and link the rituals to some scientific reason that I did not see the connection to!

The Samaj did not believe in the caste system and their implications. The Samaj aimed to abolish these rituals and idol-worship. The aspect that appealed to me the most was that the Samaj forbid its members to attack other religious. As a young Hindu going to Catholic school it seemed to answer some of my questions.

Brahmo Samaj has primarily started in the city of Calcutta, this is where me and my husband was born and raised. In the late 1800s Brahmo Samaj started spreading to other parts of the country.

I think most of us have heard about the caste system and its prevalence in India. The Samaj allowed inter-caste marriage, abolish the food-serving restrictions to lower castes and allowing all castes to assemble together in an area, rather than preaching segregation.

In the Hindu religion there is not only the Bhagwad Gita but there are other scriptures like the Veda, Upanisads, Puran that dictates the guidance of the religion. These scriptures are written in Sanskrit and not very eligible to a young Hindu who had no knowledge about Sanskrit. The Samaj translated these documents in Bengali – being a Unitarian Hindu, I have to admit that I have a version of Gita in English.

The Brahmo Samaj was not only a religious movement but a social movement particularly on women's liberalization. The women in the religion often wore white or subdued colors to symbolize the religious revolution and protection of women's rights. Such a saree is part of the table on the right.

While I was growing up, I learned that in the classic Hindu religion:

- There was practice of sati for married Hindu woman, which is a funeral custom where married women were forced to jump in the fire during the funeral of their husband. In that era woman (both mothers and daughters) did not have a voice so a wedding of young ten-year-old to an eighty-year-old man was very common. So often twenty-year-old women were forced to commit sati.
- Widows, irrespective of the age were not allowed to eat eggs or fish (the staple food in Bengal), wear colors, or re-marry.
- Women were not allowed to get any formal education.
- Women had no right to own property as any inheritance went directly to sons.
- Polygamy was very common, and the woman had no say in the choices made.
- In public gatherings, woman was not included in the main area, for example a concert. They were supposed to sit behind a curtain called the purdah, as a secluded part of the society.
- In order to marry a woman high levels of money and property needed to be paid to the man's family – also known as the dowry system.

From the teachings of the Brahmo Samaj, Raja Ramohan Roy abolished Sati in December 1829. The Brahmo Samaj fought against the caste system, polygamy, child marriage, infanticide, untouchability, seclusion of women and Purdah system. Such movement gave the woman's advocate in me hope while I was growing up surrounded by anti-woman customs. Rarely would marriages occur for woman at the age of 14, they were allowed to come out of the house and get formal education. A lot of effort was put to establishing education for Indian woman, irrespective of the martial or caste status.

Even though when I was growing up the existence of the Brahmo Samaj was non-existence, but I remember walking from my college to look at the building where this movement started when I was 18. I was often told that they were too liberal and women wearing all white was too extreme for Hindu women. In my heart I thought I can be a women's rights' advocate: it would be easier for me now than it was for the women of Brahmo Samaj in the nineteenth century. Brahmo Samaj has a special place in my heart and I am proud to find the parallel of Brahmo Samaj by being a Hindu Unitarian Universalist.

The Brahmo Samaj had several other great participants from Calcutta: Dawarkanath Tagore, Kesab Chandra Sen, Debendranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore. Rabindranath Tagore's birthday was May 7th and his songs was a basis of lot of the gatherings of Brahmo Samaj. In today's service we have included a lot of music from Tagore.

I hope I have left you with a glimpse of the Brahmo Samaj and how it shaped woman liberalization.