

World Religions
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Rabindranath Tagore was an Indian Hindu philosopher and spiritual leader. We have some of his writings in our hymnal. Tagore wrote a novel entitled *The Home and the World*, which takes place in India, where a young woman Bimala becomes highly dedicated to a nationalistic movement, which has organized a boycott of foreign goods. The slogan of the movement is *Bande Matataram* (Hail Motherland). Bimala joined the boycott after being entranced by the passionate nationalism of her husband's friend Sandip. In the beginning Bimala complains of her husband Nikhil's lack of commitment to the spirit of *Hail Motherland*. Nikhil clarifies with his wife by saying, "I am willing to serve my country, but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than my country. To worship my country as god is to bring a curse upon it."¹

In seminary I was fortunate enough to take a class on world citizenship, or cosmopolitanism, from a world renowned professor, Martha Nussbaum. Professor Nussbaum uses Tagore's novel to demonstrate the slippery slope of nationalism. Tagore's characters show how easily one can go from saying I am an Indian first, a citizen of the world second to saying I am a Hindu first, and an Indian second, or I am an upper-caste landlord first, and a Hindu second, and on and on. Nussbaum talks about human beings and our relationship with the world using the metaphor of concentric circles, or as Black Elk says sacred hoops. When we human beings are most spiritually alive we see that "that the sacred hoop of our people is one of many hoops that make one

¹ Martha Nussbaum, *For Love of Country*, p. 3

circle.” The hoops must live together like being one, in the center grows one mighty flowering tree².

Too much separation

Here in the United States I think many of us experience social and economic dynamics, which continually push us to feel separate from others. Factionalism between religious denominations arguing about who has absolute truth too often cuts us off from the one mighty flowering tree. Our two party political system often polarizes when we need to connect. Our own patriotism in the United States can have many positive effects, such as the ways we cherish freedom. However nationalism too often makes us feel we have the right to isolate in our own problems and solutions. You might look at the UN millennium goals and think the US has more than enough problems in these areas and we should do better at getting our own house in order. We do have astounding statistics on our own people. “One of every six children in America is poor (that's 13 million children), 36 million people live below the poverty line, and 45 million Americans are without health insurance.”³ Many victims from the 2005 Hurricanes Katrina & Rita are still in great need.

But we all know that the severity of world problems don't allow us to simply focus on homeland issues. Roughly 6,000 African people die each day from AIDS. 3,000 children die every day of malaria.⁴ Throughout the world 30,000 infants die every day. The Tsunami in the Indian Ocean and the recent earthquake in India & Pakistan have left many in dire need.

²Singing the Living Tradition, Black Elk #614

³Jim Wallis, *God's Politics*, p. 223

⁴New York Times Magazine, p. 83, September 18th, 2005

We are all one, inter-related whole

Unitarian Universalist and other religious communities around the country celebrate United Nations Sunday because we wish to recognize the sacred hoops of our world and in a sacred manner to recommit ourselves to living as one. Actually, as a country we probably have a better chance of solving our own problems if we better recognize our deep, real, spiritual connections to all brothers and sisters around the world. It helps to educate ourselves in the religious and philosophical roots for this movement.

In ancient times, Stoics philosophers, like Seneca, argued radically that, “we should give our first allegiance to no mere form of government, no temporal power, but to the moral community made up by the humanity of all human beings.”⁵

This connects to what Jesus was saying in the 25th chapter of the book of Matthew when he says people found him in the poor. Jesus taught that the light of the divine was to be found in all human beings, but he also knew of what would become an all-too-American tendency of forgetting the poor. Hence, he consistently reinforced the importance of the have-nots. Rev. James Forbes of Riverside Church in NYC reflects on Matthew 25 by saying that “nobody gets to heaven without a letter of reference from the poor.”⁶ Jim Wallace is an evangelical Christian who ran an experiment with his seminary companions. One of them took a scissors and cut out every piece of scripture in the bible where it talks about the importance of fighting poverty. He says these amounted to approximately 3,000 scriptures. I personally don't like the idea of cutting any bible, but I LOVE the principle of highlighting the biblical tradition's commands for us to stand together as brothers and sisters, especially with those most marginalized and oppressed.

⁵ Martha Nussbaum, *For Love of Country*, p. 7

⁶ Jim Wallace, *God's Politics* p. 16.

Always working towards world citizenship, Dr. King said that, “For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God’s universe is made.”⁷ The Dalai Lama says, “As long as there is no freedom in many parts of the world there can be no real peace and in a sense no real freedom for the rest of the world.”

Fighting against our own rigidities of staying apart from one another.

If we buy into this transforming, radical philosophy we, here in this sanctuary, can make a difference on these large, overwhelming international issues. Today we will have the opportunity to join the UU-UNO organization at the fellowship hour. We all can write our US Senators, congress people and the White House. But it may seem like beyond that there is little that we can do.

Knowing that many of us struggle with feeling limited in affecting change on international issues let me tell you about some people who decided they would not be powerless to make change. U2 is an Irish rock band and their lead singer is Bono. Bono, was born Paul Hewson and grew up in Dublin with a Catholic father and a Protestant mother. When he was 14 years old his mother suddenly died and he was left to grow up with an angry father. Bono has said that his own father “would always pour salt and vinegar onto the wound.”⁸ The kid started playing music and singing about his feelings and how he experienced life. Over the decades his band U2 has become probably the rock band of the world. For decades the band has worked on good causes with Amnesty International, Greenpeace and Nelson Mandela. Bono has now become one of the most effective celebrity lobbyists on canceling debt to poor nations, fighting AIDS and poverty

⁷ A Knock at Midnight, Martin Luther King Jr. P.208

⁸ NYTimes magazine. P. 84

around the globe. Bono has been working with Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, Condoleezza Rice, George Bush and many other top international leaders for years.

OK, you may be saying to yourself, Kent how does a super rich rock star using his celebrity status help me to know how I can affect these issues? Let me tell you a few things that Bono has done to make change. This summer at a hugely important debt reduction meeting in Gleneagles, Scotland Bono came into a room of high-level people and started by making them laugh, then he inspired them. He often looks to biblical scriptures to ground his message – he read from Matthew 25 in a private meeting with President Bush. He also tells people how they can make their mark on history. Working with activist Bob Geldorf, Bono was one of the principle players in the recent LIVE 8 concerts this summer where millions of people gathered for live music and to support the goals we are supporting today. Around the world, policy making political leaders felt pressure from LIVE 8 concert goers and other activists. Eventually they committed to a \$50 billion increase in aid.

Another essential ingredient to the successful influence Bono has had is that he refuses to write certain people off because they don't fit into the category of people some think can help. Bono knows that people think rock stars only care about sex, drugs and fame, but he never let that stop him show his care for the poor and people fighting with AIDS. He also knows that many folks have opinions on which political party or philosophy is the one that will make the difference – and which one won't. Bono let's nobody off the hook. He talks to leaders in impoverished African countries telling them they must reduce corruption and increase efficiency of using aid. In the wealthy countries, where we too must reduce corruption, Bono tells Republicans, Democrats,

Independents hat this is our responsibility. In Europe he tells Catholics, Protestants, Irish, English, French, Germans and other that together we can make a difference.

Jim Wallace says the first altar call in American Christian history was not a theological statement, but an action statement where people came to the altar to commit themselves to the abolition of slavery. Malcolm Gladwell in his book The Tipping Point discusses how seemingly small actions can result in a sudden shift in public views. It took many years of Abolitionist witness before public opinion swung against slavery. We hope that soon we'll reach a similar tipping point where we will no longer accept poverty.

There are exciting stories moving toward such a tipping point. One involves two church ladies in Alabama bringing their congressman to see the importance of debt relief as he never did before and then he became a lobbyist among his colleagues. Currently numerous evangelical Christian groups are hitting new strides in efforts to combat poverty, destructive wars, human rights violations, pandemics like HIV/AIDS, and genocide in places like Sudan. Our PA Senator Rick Santorum has publicly pushed President Bush many times to improve his commitment to many of these issues.

Perhaps for your personal preference or religious viewpoint this sermon has too much focus on policy and politics. If so don't worry the sacred hoops start right at home. Professor Nussbaum consistently highlighted the teaching of Emmanuel Kant, who articulated moral imperative that people should act as if their behavior will be used as a model of behavior for the entire world. Do you remember the Kenyan woman Wangari Maathai, who won the Nobel Peace Prize last year for her international efforts in environmental justice and democratic rights? Ms. Maathai was a pioneer African woman

in earning a PhD and became the first female professor at Nairobi University. Later she led a Green Belt Movement throughout Africa, which assisted women in planting more than 20 million trees on their farms, schools, and church lands. One key aspect of Ms. Maathai's story is that in 1977 she resigned her position as professor and planted nine trees in her back yard and then encouraged other women to do the same- providing them with resources to do so. Right there alone- planting nine trees in her back yard and helping others to do the same for themselves – this is the work of a world citizen. This is a behavior that can be used as a model for the entire world.

We don't engage in the behavior with any guarantee that others will follow. We do it because, in the words of Nikhil, we reserve our worship for what is Right. Don't worry if you aren't focused on the UN Millennium Goals every day. We can never focus on all the sacred hoops at one time. Our SAC committee is working on helping us to become a Green Sanctuary; we may need to help families in the neighborhood to pay their heating bills this winter. We do this because none of us can be at peace until all of us feel peace.

In conclusion, we are left to reflect on three questions. How can we break out of the box and make change in the coming year? How can we continue growing in a life where we engage in behavior ethically good enough to be a model for others? How can we continue to appreciate and care for our one mighty flowering tree?

John says, “God is love.” He who loves is a participant in the being of God. He who hates does not know God.”⁹ “Love is the highest good and the principle, which stands at the center of the cosmos.”

⁹ AkatM, MLK, p. 35