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Bowling Green, Kentucky
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**Truth and Virtue in Spiritual Eclecticism
Eric Bain-Selbo**

I am honored to be here today and to have the opportunity to speak with you. Since arriving here this past summer, I have been very impressed with the many varied and excellent talks I have heard from this spot. I also have enjoyed the many musical offerings as well, and want to assure you that I *won't* be singing. And I want to take the opportunity right now to apologize to all those people back there for all the singing I *have* done in the past months.

I have enjoyed the openness and honesty of those who have shared their thoughts and their work with us. In this spirit, I do feel like some amount of self-disclosure is appropriate, so that's where I'll begin. I grew up in Nashville, raised by my non-practicing Jewish mother who is excessively fond of Christmas and is very interested in the metaphysical relationship between chicken soup and her soul. My first real encounter with religion was going with a friend of mine (I must have been about 10 years old) to his Baptist church. To this day I still don't know why I walked up front that day when the minister asked if anyone would like to come confess their sins and accept Jesus as their savior. I'm not sure what sins I had to confess, but the minister seemed pretty sure I had some. I don't remember exactly what he said to me, I just remember being scared. When I got home, I told my mother how frightening the whole thing was, and she assured me that I wouldn't ever have to go to church again. I wouldn't for many,

many years. Since then, however, I have overcome my church phobia, dabbled in Zen Buddhism (both philosophically and practically), and really developed a rich appreciation for much of the Judeo-Christian tradition. You've heard of Jews for Jesus. Well, I sometimes call myself a JUBU for Jesus. In fact, my niece Lexi and I have founded a new religion by that name, though we have no doctrine, principles, rituals, organization, or (most problematically) a process by which my family could convert to it. It's fairly exclusive. It's also an example (perhaps not a good one) of what I call spiritual eclecticism, the topic of my talk this morning.

Let me speak describe what I mean by spiritual eclecticism by drawing I our attention to four works, Jan Willis' *Dreaming Me: From Baptist to Buddhist, One Woman's Spiritual Journey*, Rodger Kamenetz's *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India*, Thich Nhat Hanh's *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, and the Dalai Lama's *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus*. I believe all four authors can be described as spiritual eclectics, and that each author wonderfully illustrates in his or her actions or words the necessary virtues of spiritual eclecticism. These virtues are humility, charity, and courage.

Both Willis and Kamenetz come to humility and charity out of a spiritual void created by their alienation from their native traditions – Christianity in the case of the Willis and Judaism in the case of the Kamenetz. Willis grew up in Alabama and was raised a Baptist. Her family was pretty religious by most standards, and she clearly had significant and powerful religious experiences. In her work she tells a wonderful story of her baptism (47-51) as well as an inspiring story of her visions of Jesus as she took the

long bus ride from Alabama up to New York to attend Cornell University. Though she had had spiritual doubts before, her education at Cornell led to more critical thinking about religion and especially Christianity. (Confirming, of course, that higher education is in the service of the devil.) She came to reject much of the Christian tradition, and this opened her to the many alternative perspectives she found in Buddhism – Tibetan Buddhism in particular. The overcoming of Christian dogmatism allowed her to be humble about her own knowledge as well as charitable toward Buddhism. She eventually would travel to India to study, meet with the Dalai Lama, and begin a lengthy relationship with Lama Yeshe, her own spiritual guru.

Like Willis, Kamenetz came to have serious questions about his native tradition. This led him to not only question his own involvement in Judaism but to a concern for the very survival of the tradition. Such doubts and anxiety made him receptive as well to what Tibetan Buddhism might provide. They allowed him to be humble and charitable as he journeyed to India with other Jews for a conversation with the Dalai Lama.

But one need not be reduced to grave doubts and skepticism to be humble and charitable. Both Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama embody humility and charity, yet they do so while remaining firmly grounded in their Buddhist heritage.

The Dalai Lama urges people to experience the inner transformation that comes from a deep understanding of their native traditions. As a consequence, the individual will discover a “kind of natural humility” arising in him or her, allowing the individual “to communicate better with people from other religious traditions and cultural backgrounds” (41). What the Dalai Lama is advocating, however, is not some kind of

wishy-washy “I’m okay, you’re okay” philosophy. He, in fact, is arguing for a “state of healthy skepticism” (113)—a skepticism that allows for a robust engagement with other religious traditions.

Nhat Hanh affirms at the very beginning of his work his desire to learn from all the world’s religious traditions. As he puts it: “I do not see any reason to spend one’s whole life tasting just one kind of fruit. We human beings can be nourished by the best values of many traditions” (2). In order to be nourished in this way, one must engage in dialogue. Nhat Hanh agrees with the Dalai Lama that for dialogue to occur we must “live deeply our own tradition” while at the same time we must “listen deeply to others” (7). We must practice humility and charity. We must be “aware of both the positive and negative aspects of our own tradition” (8) – practice humility – and “appreciate that truth can be received from outside of . . . our own group” (9) – practice charity.

Humility and charity, however, must be accompanied by courage. All of the authors exhibit courage – and in a number of different ways. While open to the plurality of religious traditions available in the world, they nevertheless stand up for some central truths. Far from taking the plurality of voices as promoting some kind of relativism, they insist on the revelation of truth that these voices provide. We tend to live in a world where people too often feel compelled either to commit themselves to the absolute Truth of a specific religious tradition or ideology or resign themselves to the fact that truth is *only* culturally-specific or even that there is no truth at all to speak of. This is the choice among fundamentalism, relativism, and nihilism. Willis, Kamenetz, Nhat Hanh, and the Dalai Lama, each in their own way, courageously reject these popular and too

easy options – attempting to reveal and express truth in their work (avoiding relativism and nihilism) while affirming a deeply multicultural and interreligious worldview (avoiding fundamentalism).

Obviously transcending our own cultural and religious dogma requires humility, but also courage. Such dogma is *our world*, it is the home in which we dwell. To transcend dogma requires courageous action, analogous to the courage that we all once had to muster in order to leave the comfort of our childhood homes or to go abroad into foreign lands.

When we muster up such courage, we discover a marvelous world of difference that can be both awe-inspiring and frightening. At the same time, we also open ourselves to the possibility of discovering commonalities in this difference. This is true for all the authors. As just one example, Nhat Hanh comes to find important parallels between the Buddha and the concept of God. Citing theologian Paul Tillich, he notes that both God and the Buddha can be referred to as the “ground of being” (51). In addition, he concludes that “[i]n each of us is a seed of understanding. That seed is God. It is also the Buddha. If you doubt the existence of that seed of understanding, you doubt God and you doubt the Buddha” (84).

The fruits of courageously leaving one’s home really ripen when one also is courageous enough to allow the experience of the other to transform him or herself. This need not require the abandonment of one’s own native tradition, a rejection of one’s past. Such a false either/or choice is counter to the idea of spiritual eclecticism. If one enjoys an apple, one need not then assume that an orange tastes like crap. Both

the apple and the orange can be embraced. Similarly, the spiritual eclectic might affirm both his or her native tradition and what the other has to offer.

For Willis, Tibetan Buddhism provides valuable tools for the psyche of an African-American woman who grew up in the South. As with many African-Americans growing up in the mid-20th century (and perhaps still today), her upbringing too often served to damage her self-esteem, to make her feel unworthy. While humility certainly is a virtue, one also needs to be able to affirm their self-worth. In short, she needed to know how one can be both humble and courageous. She discovered methods to achieve this within Tibetan Buddhism. But Willis' journey has included being nourished by both Christianity and Buddhism. She most fully realized this when she found herself praying in both traditions during particularly difficult periods or moments in her life (279-80, 310)—such as during a treacherous and frightening landing of a commercial airliner. She confidently calls herself a Baptist Buddhist (and you thought being a Unitarian was hard!). She writes:

[People] who've had occasion – or taken the license – to comment on it, have stridently voiced disdain and disapproval: "Either you believe in Christ, our Lord, as your sole and only savior, or you're lost!" A young, well-educated, and articulate black man who was visiting Wesleyan [the college in Connecticut where she teaches] once told me exactly this. To this vociferous attack by a newly born Christian, and to others like it, I can only say, "Well, I trust that Jesus Himself is more understanding and compassionate." [She adds:] The Jesus I knew from the Gospel stories was the Jesus who had ministered to women, to the poor and downtrodden; and He was the Jesus I knew personally, because He had ridden with me on that bus ride to Cornell. Moreover, it seems to me that those who see a disjuncture in my being a Baptist-Buddhist haven't spent any amount of time reflecting on what, or who, a Buddha really is

– or a Christ, for that matter. As always, in matters of faith and of the heart, a little concrete experience and practice usually takes one higher, while at the same time sets one on firmer ground. (311)

The importance of religious practice rather than simply doctrine or belief likewise is central for both the Dalai Lama and Nhat Hanh in regard to their engagement with Christianity. Nhat Hanh writes that when “*we understand and practice deeply the life and teachings of Buddha or the life and teachings of Jesus, we penetrate the door and enter the abode of the living Buddha and the living Christ, and life eternal presents itself to us*” (56). Through such understanding and *deep practice* we courageously open ourselves to the possibility of transformation through our dialogue with others. For the Dalai Lama as well, it is through practice (in this case, Buddhist meditation and Christian mysticism) that two traditions can come together in mutual understanding and transformation.

In Kamenetz’s case, interreligious dialogue led to a dramatic transformation in how he viewed his Jewish tradition. This too is an act of courage. It sometimes is quite easy to settle on an overly-optimistic and rosy view of our native tradition or on an unsympathetic and adolescent denunciation of our heritage. It is much harder, indeed courageous, to continue to critically engage one’s own tradition. Kamenetz discovers this in India. Talking with Tibetans, a people who have experienced significant historical injustices like Jews have, led Kamenetz to marvel at the persistent optimism about the world that the Tibetans exhibited. He marveled too at their emphasis on non-violent behavior in the midst of suffering those injustices. He learned about the Buddhist teaching that anger “is like stabbing yourself through the stomach” with a sword in order

to stab the enemy standing behind you (187). The Tibetan Buddhist perspective led Kamenetz to a critique of anger and militarism in the Jewish tradition. He questions: “Is Jewish anger, however damaging in some respects, essential to Jewish survival? Or will a Judaism that continues, in some ways, to dwell on and even nourish a sense of anger over past injustices prove to be an increasingly burdensome heritage to pass on to our children as we enter the twenty-first century” (188).

The concern with the future of Judaism runs throughout Kamenetz’s work. His concern is central to his encounter with JUBUs or Jews who have converted to Buddhism. Kamenetz accepts much of their critique of Judaism – such as the “authoritarian, masculine, and even paranoid language” about God (237-8), the difficulty in accessing the mystical or contemplative elements within the tradition (115, 239-40), the materialism of much of Jewish life today, and the mistreatment of women and ignoring of “the feminine” in too much of the tradition (220). For JUBUs, Buddhism provides an escape from the conservative constraints of Judaism and opens up a mystical world (through meditation) that they find more conducive to their spiritual journeys. For Kamenetz, the encounter with Buddhism led him back to the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah.

While agreeing with many JUBU criticisms, Kamenetz nevertheless does not want to abandon Judaism. He stands up for his tradition. He rejects the idea that Judaism is somehow inferior to Buddhism (240-1). He concludes: “I wasn’t so ready to declare Buddhism the hands-down winner in the all-round spirituality contest. I’d give Buddhism an A for meditation and Judaism an A for family values. But Buddhism gets a

C- for boring poetry (too much hyperbole) and Judaism gets an A+ for great stand-up comics. And I thought kreplach [a kind of Jewish wonton] and mo-mo [a Tibetan pancake] were a dead heat, but lox and bagels a tiebreaker in the food category” (143-4). Instead of determining an overall winner, Kamenetz uses what he learns about Buddhism and the Tibetan people as a way of reappropriating Judaism for himself and ultimately (he hopes) for all those within his tradition. At the end of the powerful experience of visiting India and meeting with the Dalai Lama, Kamenetz concludes:

This is what I saw: Judaism, stripped away of all its historical baggage, the long history of anti-Semitism and the defenses it has aroused. Judaism with its own joys and sweetness, and its own deep wisdom. The Dalai Lama gave each of us a glimpse of that, a glimpse so powerful it changed every one of us who experienced it. (280)

Allowing oneself to be changed in this way requires humility, charity, and courage. The consequence of this for Kamenetz was the ability to engage his own tradition in a new way – in a way, for example, that embraced human sexuality and “the feminine” and added a deeper spiritual and meditative content to rituals (287). Indeed, it is the rediscovery of Jewish mysticism that is most needed in the tradition – a lesson that Kamenetz learns from Buddhism.

Willis too comes to a greater appreciation of her native tradition, even if not the same kind of reappropriation that Kamenetz experiences. Long after discovering Buddhism and sustaining her Buddhist practice, Willis found herself sitting in an Alabama church with her father. She writes:

It was through Buddhism that I had first encountered a tradition of meditation that offered a way to instigate positive spiritual change. Still, getting older told me that

Buddhism had no exclusive rights to such methods. Sitting in Sixth Avenue [Baptist Church], with some decades and life experiences behind me, I began to see this environment differently. It was a place of solace for my father. It was a place that welcomed me and allowed my tears. It was a joyous place. The Spirit moved and breathed here because it was holy ground. That *same* spirit infused Buddhists, too. (271)

I liked very much what I had heard that morning and what I had, myself, experienced with my dad and with my people. I knew that at this point in my life, this was the right place to be. In this black Baptist sanctuary I, an African American Buddhist, had come home. (275)

Willis had discovered what Kamenetz also had discovered, that a courageous spirit can encounter the other and return from that encounter with new eyes, eyes that can see one's home, one's native tradition in a new way. Indeed, through the other we can "come home."

So what do we learn about spiritual eclecticism from these authors. Let me summarize three important lessons.

First, we learn that spiritual eclecticism is not syncretism let alone synthesis. The authors clearly are not attempting to synthesize, making a single whole out of various religious parts. Similarly, syncretism includes the idea of "fusion," and "to syncretize" can be defined as the "attempt to unite and harmonize especially without critical examination or logical unity" (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*). None of the authors are engaged in syncretism either. They really are engaged in something more eclectic, "selecting what appears to be best in various doctrines, methods, or styles" (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*). If you go to a restaurant with an eclectic menu, this does not mean that your order will taste Mexican, Chinese, and Italian all at

once. Rather, it means that you can pick from the menu what you would like and would be best for you. Similarly, with spiritual eclecticism one does not reduce religious traditions to some bland common denominator or casserole, but instead one is nourished by each in turn. For Nhat Hanh, the encounter with Christianity did not mean simply the incorporation of Jesus into Buddhist terminology but the affirmation of a new “spiritual root” in his life (99-100). For Willis, being a Baptist-Buddhist is not the creation of a new, single religious life, but the embracing and experience of two distinct forms of religiosity. In both their cases, the integrity of the other (whether it be Christian, Buddhist, or whatever) remains intact.

The second less has to do with truth, and I want to use the imagery of the spiritual mountain to highlight it. According to one use of this imagery, the mountain is traversed with various paths (the world’s religious traditions), and they all lead to the same point, the same summit (representing the truth). I want us to think differently. I would rather have us imagine that there is a range of mountains, each one representing one of the world’s religious traditions. The summits of these mountains are not separate truths. Rather, they are vantage points from which we can attempt to see the truth in the distance. If we accept this imagery, then efforts to syncretize or synthesize religious traditions is not advantageous to our pursuit of truth. We do not want to combine mountains, leaving only one vantage point. Rather, we want to scale as many mountains as we can in order to get as many vantage points on the truth as possible. I think this imagery fits well with the Dalai Lama’s claim for a “multidimensional” conception of truth (81) and Nhat Hanh’s insistence that “Truth has no boundaries”

(154). It also is consistent with the idea that truth is an event. Truth is not a correspondence between our words or thoughts and some reality “out there.” Truth is something that happens. In this case, it is the event of our engagement with a tradition – it is the event of our climbing a mountain and looking out upon the horizon.

When we think of religious pluralism as central to our pursuit of truth, then we no longer get bogged down with our obsessive desire to determine which religion is *really* true or is the best. We are able to practice a bit more humility and charity. When we no longer feel compelled to determine who or what is better, then peace really is possible. This leads us to our third lesson, a lesson about pluralism and peace.

Spiritual eclectics (and I think this pertains to Unitarians as well), must avoid an uncritical acceptance of equality among all religious viewpoints – a blind or naïve pluralism. Indeed, it may be the case that we can make compelling arguments for why one mountaintop may not provide the best view of truth. We should not allow our humility and charity to prevent us from courageously witnessing to the dangers of some religious viewpoints. I have in mind certain fundamentalist movements throughout the world religious community, movements that demonstrably commit psychological or physical harm against their adherents and/or their enemies. Such movements thwart our efforts to engage in continuing dialogue with one another, and thus are obstacles to peace. Such fundamentalist movements, so often working in opposition to dialogue and a vibrant pluralism, typically make mole hills out of mountains and do little to foster peace.

In conclusion, spiritual eclecticism is both a possibility because of religious pluralism and a support of such pluralism. Pluralism is good. It does not entail exclusivity on the part of any particular tradition or impermeable boundaries that prevent our free passage from one to the other. Pluralism serves us; it provides our world with depth and complexity. Pluralism by definition entails differences, but it certainly does not exclude similarities. Pluralism becomes a source of conflict only of our own choosing, when we use differences to alienate ourselves from each other. Just because conflict and intolerance have come from pluralism does not mean that this necessarily must be so and that we should try to overcome pluralism itself. As the Dalai Lama argues:

Some people believe that the most reasonable way to attain harmony and solve problems relating to religious intolerance is to establish one universal religion for everyone. However, I have always felt that we should have different religious traditions because human beings possess so many different mental dispositions: one religion simply cannot satisfy the needs of such a variety of people. If we try to unify the faiths of the world into one religion, we will also lose many of the qualities and richnesses [sic] of each particular tradition. Therefore, I feel it is better, in spite of the many quarrels in the name of religion, to maintain a variety of religious traditions. (41)

Pluralism should be our source of joy and hope, not alienation and despair. It should be the source of ever-renewing truth about ourselves and our world. But for pluralism to be a source of enrichment rather than conflict; for it to be a vibrant, truth-seeking conversation rather than a naïve relativism or pernicious nihilism; we must be willing to be spiritual eclectics and to exercise virtues like humility, charity, and courage. Who know, maybe it is that kind of pluralism that will allow peace to break out.

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