

**The Sacred Source of Life & Unitarianism –
July 3, 2016 - By Joyce Ramay**

As you know, I have a deep appreciation for the Sources of our Tradition – which are listed on the back of your Order of Service. Unitarians have a vision of one-ness, of coming together. We are entering a new phase of human evolution, when it has become urgent to call for **all** people to join together - to save ourselves, our Mother Earth, and the Sacred Sources of Life.

A primary human theological and scientific question has been: Where did we come from? Where did Life come from? Both science and religion have creation stories. Science tells us about the Big Bang, that created the universe, and Photosynthesis, the process used by plants to convert light energy from the Sun, into chemical energy, that can be used to fuel organisms' activities via energy transformation. So in science, the Sun is seen as the Source of Life.

I grew up in Minnesota, where we often had snow on the ground for six months of the year. It was easy to become a sun worshiper there. From the earliest time I can remember, I would go into the yard and gaze in wonder and awe at the sun. I loved the warm feel of it on my skin, and the way that it blazed forth in glory at sunrise and sunset. Oh those splendid days of summertime, when the sun brought everything to life again from the dark cold winter! The Sacred Sun, the Source of Life, the energy that brightened our world and our souls!

For thousands of years, humans have left evidence of a Sense of the Sacred in cave paintings, rock carvings, and images of animals and fertile women. Humans possess what some have called a gene for religion. We instinctively, intuitively venerate whatever is found to be precious and praiseworthy in life.

Sun worship was practiced at Stonehenge over 7,000 years ago. The stone circle is arranged so that the sun shines through them precisely on the Summer Solstice, which we celebrated a few days ago. There have been many examples of sun worship, with sun gods being parts of pantheons of gods.

But in recorded history, in the 14th century BCE, something unique happened in Egypt. Unitarianism was born. Pharaoh Akhenaten and his wife Nefertiti declared that there was only one god, Aten, who was responsible for all life and all creation.

They banned the worship of idols and other deities, and like all reformers, they angered a lot of priests. After their deaths, attempts were made to erase their names from the records. Yet fate has a strange way of defying such actions, and one of the only royal Egyptian tombs that had not been raided and desecrated through the centuries was that of King Tut, the son of Akhenaten. And lo and behold, there they found the magnificent carved relief showing Akhenaten and Nefertiti with the sun (that we showed on the weekly email), the beautiful head of Nefertiti, (hold up) and the prayer to the one and only sun god, Aten (which I read). Thousands of years before there were Unitarians in Europe and America, an Egyptian pharaoh had become the first Unitarian and had promoted a Unitarian religion. But Unitarians have often not been welcomed, particularly by existing priesthoods. So it is not surprising that, after Akhenaten's death, worship of the old gods was re-established by the priests in Egypt.

But wait There was a Jewish baby who was found in the bulrushes by Pharaoh's daughter. She took him home and raised him as her own child, and called him Moses. We have no precise record of when Moses lived, but recent historians have indicated the late 14th and early 13th century BCE – just after Akhenaten's reign. Moses grew up in the pharaoh's palace, and would have been exposed to the new religion or stories about it. The Bible tells us that Moses led his people out of Egypt. Could it be that Moses and those religious refugees were people who had worshipped Akhenaten's Unitarian god Aten? We do know that followers and priests of Aten were persecuted after Akhenaten died. The Old Testament was not written until the Babylonian captivity in the 6th century BCE, so we cannot know for sure. But the synchronicity of events in Egyptian history and legends in the Bible creates a strong possibility that it might have happened that way. And scholars have found significant commonalities between Akhenaten's hymn to the sun and Psalm 104.

People of the Jewish faith believed in their one god. Judaism may have been the first continuously practiced form of monotheism, but their god was a tribal god, not a god of all people. The universal aspect was missing, since they alone were God's Chosen People. More recent Jewish scholars have modified the meaning of Chosen People to suggest that they were chosen to spread the faith in the one true God to others, but that was not the original conception.

Then another baby came named Jesus! Jesus did not claim to be God, although like mystics everywhere, including Akhenaten, he did experience an intimate connection with the divine, whom he referred to as Father. Jesus extended his message to all people, not only Jews – he admired the Good Samaritan, and reached out to those who had been excluded. He criticized the privileged Pharisees and heartless religious leaders. He threw the money changers from the temple, declaring it was not to be a place of profit. Jesus's words and actions included everyone in his embrace, not only the chosen few.

In 325 A.D. Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea, to settle the dispute about whether Jesus was God, or whether he had been created later. Of course, it suited a Roman emperor to unite the empire in the name of a god, so from that time on, Christianity became a religion known for the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It retained a Unitarian aspect, inasmuch as there were three persons in one, but Jesus was declared to be God.

Still some Christians retained a different view. They rejected the Nicene Trinity, and believed that Jesus had been created by the one God. That was referred to as the Arian heresy, which survived in various forms, mostly in the Middle East and North Africa, whereas Trinitarian Christianity dominated the European Graeco Roman world.

In the 7th century A.D. the Muslim prophet Muhammad led caravans throughout a region that was filled with pagan idol worshippers, Jews, and both types of Christians. Some scholars claim that he was influenced most by the Arians. His vision was Unitarian Universalist – there is no God but God, He is Creator of all the Universe, and God of all people everywhere. The Quran includes the name of Moses more than any other name. It includes a chapter named Mary (Maryam) and the story of the birth of Jesus. But it explicitly denies that Jesus was God. Jews and Christians were, however, included in the House of Abraham.

Islam spread throughout the Middle East, North Africa, Western Asia, and South Asia. In 1453 the Muslim Ottomans conquered Constantinople (now Istanbul) and the SE part of Europe. 40 years later, in 1492, when Isabel and Ferdinand conquered Muslim Spain, they sent Columbus to America, but they also inaugurated the infamous Inquisition and expelled Muslims and Jews from southern Spain, where the Moors had led a high civilization for centuries.

Many of the expelled Spanish Jews were given safe haven in Turkey by the Ottomans. And the Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church continued to reside in Istanbul under the Muslim Turks. Today, Turkey is also receiving many religious refugees from the wars in the Middle East. (And we have just seen the terrible tragedy of terrorism at the Istanbul airport.)

We are generally told that Unitarianism began in Transylvania. What we don't usually hear is that Transylvania was under the sovereignty of the Muslim Ottoman ruler, Suleiman the Magnificent, at that time. John Sigismund, the Christian king of Transylvania, initiated a series of debates between theological schools of the Reformation in the 1560s. Like some of us who have changed our religions, he converted from Catholicism, to Lutheranism, then to Calvinism, and later accepted Anti-Trinitarian Unitarianism. In 1568, his Diet passed the famous Edict of Torda, which stated that "faith is a gift of God" and prohibited persecution of people for religious reasons. That edict expanded the limits of freedom of religion beyond the standards of 16th-century Europe. Unitarianism has survived in that region to this day.

Here in America, some of our founding fathers like Thomas Jefferson had Unitarian views. They did not accept the Trinity of the Anglican Church of England. Part of the independence movement involved establishing freedom of religion – like that of Transylvania.

If we search deeply, we discover a pattern of contact of civilizations, cross fertilization, and reciprocal influences on culture and religion through the centuries. Unfortunately, most of the stories are told in isolation from each other, as if ONLY WE conceived of this or that idea.

Throughout history, Unitarianism arose as reformation movements, partially generated by theological beliefs, but also by desire to eliminate corruption of established hierarchies and priesthoods that often controlled or oppressed people through religion.

There is something in our most vital human spirit that seeks to spread its wings, to explore the universe, to go where no one has gone before. We don't like mean, selfish people who try to dominate us with irrational rules, harsh threats, and rigid regulations. Prophets and founders of religions have been people who stood up and protested. They challenged people to think, to seek the truth wherever they could find it.

But then new hierarchies, new theologies and new rituals were established, which unfortunately were often just as narrow and dogmatic as those that they sought to reform and replace. The hazard of any religion is that some followers decide that they alone have a monopoly on truth, and a monopoly on virtue. They build pyramids of administration as tributes to their own egos. They seek power by imposing their own worldviews on others. Some structure and organization is needed, but they carry it to extremes.

It's good to have compassionate, inclusive and inspirational principles that we can share. It's beneficial to affirm that there are many sources from which we can draw wisdom and guidance. There are many rivers leading into the ocean, and many paths to the top of the mountain. Fortunately, at All Faiths, we don't all have to be on the same one.

Each person has his or her own way of finding strength to face the struggles of the day, and to encounter the beauty, wonders, and mysteries of our universe. Every morning when I wake up, the first thing that I do is go to my office patio doors, open them, face the sun and say, "Good morning, God. Good morning, Sun. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." It's a great way to start the day with a sense of gratitude toward the Sacred Source of Life.

Yes, I am still a sun worshipper, and I am grateful to Akhenaten, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, John Sigismund, and other prophets of Unitarianism. We Unitarians like to think, "I did it my way." But let's have a little humility and not forget our many sources. We stand on the shoulders of giants. Being recipients of this rich heritage, created by so many inspired people, may we move forward confidently in their footsteps, trustfully, and hopefully into an increasingly compassionate future!

Now, more than ever, it's essential for us to rediscover our Unitarian roots. By identifying more strongly with the Forces of Life in the Universe, we can energize the motivation and inspiration that we need to save our Sacred Life on Earth.

For too long, we have been exploiters, taking without regard to the consequences. Greed and selfishness have defined much of our modern existence. Only if we cultivate a greater sense of awe, of reverence, of appreciation can we mobilize the necessary shift towards becoming Stewards of Earth and Co-creators with the Sacred Source of Life. May it be so!