



A contribution from Devi Bhaktananda.

Preface from Erin McGaughan, Worship Arts Director: “Devi is a longtime friend whom I watched grow from having beginning interest in music to becoming a strong and successful kirtan leader. She’s led many others even as she has been a constant and humble learner herself. I consider her advice as gold. Her website is <https://shaakta.org>.”

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I love experiencing a taste of all the ways people worship and relate to God. One to the things that drew me to New Thought was their inclusion of other faith traditions and philosophies. I never really believed a God that was all Love would condemn anyone to an eternity of torture just because they didn’t agree with one very narrow depiction of divinity. How is that loving? If God is so big It can’t be comprehended or described, how does one narrative point to the only way of getting there? There are as many ways to experience divinity as people on the planet, and it is wonderful to be introduced to something new from another culture that you feel a deep personal resonance with.

I was fascinated by all the different interfaith practices I was introduced to. I particularly fell in love with Hinduism. It was during a class 12 years ago at a New Thought church that I felt something shift in my body on a cellular level while chanting a traditional Hindu chant, or mantra. I used that mantra to heal a debilitating health condition that all my doctors over the previous 8.5 years said was incurable. I healed in six weeks, and that launched a headlong immersion into everything Hinduism, studying here in the US and in India.

Sharing interfaith traditions can be deeply problematic, however. The more I learned, the more I cringed when New Thought teachers took on the role of teaching stories and practices from traditions outside of their culture or realm of expertise. Their errors ranged from simple mispronunciations to complete mischaracterization of the core of the teaching. Cultural appropriation and decolonization conversations are increasing around the globe, we’re learning how misrepresenting spiritual practices from another culture can cause real harm, both to the source culture and the person receiving the erroneous teachings. As a Western white woman with an adopted Hindu spiritual name who has committed to speaking up on this issue, I’ve been at the center of some pretty hot and uncomfortable international conversations, and I’ve learned a lot.

Context matters. Most New Thought churches have very good intentions. They want to provide different pathways to the divine for their congregants and make their services more inclusive. However, when a practice is taken out of its supporting cultural context, it loses its foundation. Spiritual practices are not surface level decoration, they are very technical systems that have many important parts. A person who is learning this new practice at a New Thought church may miss some key prerequisites that make the practice stable. It’s akin to falling in love with a particularly gorgeous cobblestone roof on a house you saw in Italy. You want this on your own home, so much so, that you go to the store and purchase all the parts you could see from the street. You try to recreate this stunning roof on your own

home, and are surprised when it collapses in on you because you didn't know about and obtain the stabilizing infrastructure that you couldn't see from the outside.

This happens a lot with dharmic traditions from South Asia. Americans like what they see on the surface, and decide they don't need the supporting underpinning. It might not be as sexy or fun, so they write it off as archaic and toss it in the waste bin. They then alter the practices to suit their preferences, inventing new ways to express it, in the name of "spirituality belongs to everyone", and it ends up becoming so distorted, the source culture doesn't even recognize it. Once it has become popularized in its new form under the original name, the original sacred spiritual tradition has been erased. To add insult to injury, Americanized South Asian dharmic spiritual practices make up a multi-billion dollar industry, and none of that money is going back to compensate people in the source culture. It's just the latest form of colonization; extracting the riches and leaving the source peoples impoverished.

Should New Thought churches avoid sharing from other traditions entirely? Clearly it's not practical for church leaders to immerse in every other tradition and study enough to know whether they are making these kinds of mistakes. No, I don't think so. So how can they share without appropriating someone else's sacred tradition? The answer is simple. Consult someone from the source tradition. These days video meetings make spanning the globe free and easy. In seconds, one can be connected with someone on the opposite side of the world, sharing audio and video, sharing accurate and important information, including visuals. These meetings can be recorded so that they can be a source of verification when memory fails.

Key points to keep in mind when sharing from another tradition:

- When at all possible, hire someone from the source tradition to come and share any teachings and practices they feel are appropriate in person. If that's not possible, consult with them remotely about what is appropriate to share.
- Check in with more than one source teacher. These faith traditions are not monoliths. There is a variety of opinions and constraints around what is and is not appropriate. Don't go with the first person who says yes. Internalized colonization is a thing.
- Put time and energy into pronouncing terms correctly. New Thought teaches that words create reality, so we should know that mispronunciation could create a different reality than the source culture intended. We need to walk our talk here.
- Show respect for the knowledge holders of the source tradition, usually a colonized population, by compensating them for their time and their knowledge.
- Compile a list of teachers from the source culture to refer congregants to. Resist the urge to promote American teachers.
- Study and sensitize yourself to the history of the people who follow that tradition. In the case of Indigenous Peoples in North America, they were punished and even killed for holding sweat lodges and burning sage, all the way up until the early-1970s. Children were stolen from their families and put into boarding schools thousands of miles away, where they were starved, beaten, and killed for speaking their own language or wearing their traditional clothing as late as 1973. Don't use their sacred artifacts or language that associates you with them if you haven't

also shouldered their burdens. In Seattle, to this day the Duwamish Tribe is being denied federal tribal recognition. Don't call your congregation or group of friends your tribe.

- If someone asks you not to teach a particular aspect of their tradition, respect that. Don't expect them to take the time and energy to explain why if they don't offer that information freely. No means no.

Cultural respect is possible, but it requires an even power dynamic and exchange. Cultural appropriation is taking something simply because we want it. Becoming aware of how New Thought churches have appropriated others' sacred traditions in the past might be uncomfortable. It's good to become mindful of that and sit with the discomfort. It's something we need to face in order to grow into this One we talk about being made from all the diversity.