
Ancient and Beautiful Practices of Our Own

**An article for the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler**

It was wonderful to have Barbara Brown Taylor at the Cathedral of St. Philip last weekend, and I loved the opportunity to be with her again. Thank you, Barbara! Our wonderful reaction to her presentation also reminded me of my own experiences in the “holy envy” of interfaith conversations.

“Holy Envy,” of course, is the title of her new book, a title which she freely admits is taken from an interfaith principle of Krister Stendahl. I appreciate that principle: that when we try to understand another religion, we ought to try to look for elements in that other religion that we like and might even wish were part of our own. We might therefore practice “holy envy.”

I agree with the principle! I also appreciate my Christian brothers and sisters who are genuinely interested in the practices of those different from them – those who are interested not in order to find heresy, but in order to discover good and spiritual things. Most Christians of good faith are not interested in disparaging the rituals and beliefs of those in other religions.

Still, I am amused at what sometimes happens. Some Christians weirdly feel that other religions have more ceremonial detail and devotional practice than Christians do! In several of my interfaith pilgrimages, while Christians have honored the daily practices of Jews, and Muslims, and Buddhists, and Hindus – they have also complained privately to me in questions like this: “Why don’t Christians have ritual daily prayers and postures? Why don’t Christians pray with such ancient beauty?”

But we do!

The more ancient and traditional and catholic of our Christian churches do indeed keep the beautiful practices of the faith! But at least two problems have developed within some of our Christian churches. First, many of those traditionally-minded churches have clung to outmoded and rigid exclusivist beliefs, thus defeating those beautiful practices. Second, many Christian churches have succumbed to jettisoning those practices in the name of “easy access,” and “speaking in a language that contemporary culture can understand.”

Now, I certainly appreciate the need to translate our practices and languages into more accessible forms. That’s what sermons and conversations and homilies are supposed to do! However, if we forget those practices and disciplines – well, then, we forget those practices and disciplines. And, thus, we lose the highly spiritual, symbolic, beautiful, and deep expressions of the mystery of God.

What I am discovering, more and more, in both conservative and liberal Christians, is a search for the ancient mysteries of our own tradition. I am finding more and more people who want to return to the beauty and truth of liturgical patterns and poetic words. Committed believers really do want to learn the practices and languages of their own faith. Seekers and discoverers want to learn the intricacies and details of Christian prayer practice.

You might ask: What are some of those beautiful practices and customs? Well, they range from such simple things as

candles and vestments to labyrinths and Easter fire. They are pealing bells at funerals and quiet meditations in one's pew before the service. Making the sign of the cross during liturgy. Singing the Gloria in Excelsis, some weird prayer in another language. The Venite. The Pascha Nostrum. The Kyrie. A holy altar in a beautiful room. Receiving a small wafer of bread and slight sip of strong wine. Waving palm branches in the road outside one's parish. Smearing ashes on a forehead. The Lord's Prayer. Tithing! Feeding the hungry. Caring for the poor.

The list of practices is endless. Each one of them is holy. And each one might well be enviable to someone desiring the mystery and truth of God. I hope we care for those practices, and I hope we steward those traditions. God's truth really is larger and more powerful than any one tradition, yes. But, on the other hand, if we are open and faithful, then God's truth is also powerful enough to speak through almost any tradition – even our own!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

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