

Which Islam?

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
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February 24, 2008

Readings

Our first reading come from the *Hadith*, the sayings and traditional accounts of Muhammad. These are a few brief sayings about the virtues of kindness and compassion and love and service:

No one is a true believer unless he desireth for his brother that which he desireth for himself.

Do you love your Creator? Love your fellow-beings first.

Kindness is a mark of faith: and whoever hath not kindness hath not faith.

What actions are most excellent? To gladden the heart of a human being, to feed the hungry, to help the afflicted, to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful,, and to remove the wrongs of the injured.

Our second reading comes from a fine book by one of the pre-eminent scholars of Islam, Iranian-born, MIT educated Seyyed Hossein Nasr: *The Heart of Islam*, published in 2002. Nasr is currently the university professor of Islamic studies at George Washington University in D.C.. These three brief passages are from the conclusion of his book:

Turning more particularly to Islam and the West, it must be emphasized that whether we are Muslims, Jews, Christians, or even secularists, whether we live in the Islamic world or the West, we are in need of meaning in our lives, of ethical norms to guide our actions, of a vision that would allow us to live at peace with each other and with the rest of God's creation.

The heart of Islam is also the Islam of the heart, which is that spiritual virtue, or *ihsan*, that enables us "to see God everywhere" and to be His eyes, ears, and hands" in this world.

It is for Muslims to heed the call from the heart of Islam and live an ethical and spiritual life accordingly, but it is also for those in the West who seek meaning in their lives to turn to their own center and to realize that in coming to know better the heart of Islam they may gain more than greater insight into another religion and civilization; they may gain greater insight into their own heart and soul. The heart of any religion is none other than that single, universal Truth that resides at the heart of all authentic religions and that is itself the foundation of the religion of the heart.

Sermon

What image or images come to mind when you think of Islam? Or when you think of Muslims?

Whatever images arise, my guess they probably come nowhere near to embracing the diversity within Islam. For the Islamic world of over 1 billion Muslims of various cultures and languages is immense; and in general in the West and in our nation in particular our understanding of Islam is woefully impoverished. Many tend to think of Islam as a single, monolithic reality. Which just isn't so, anymore than Christianity is one monolithic reality. Goodness, when it comes to Christianity, even just here in Hingham we have everything from Quaker silent meeting to Catholic mass, from Bible-based conservatives to theological liberals of several stripes.

Well, Islam is diverse too. And in our complex and dangerous world, a world in which Islam is playing and will play a huge part, we cannot afford inadequate understandings. Knowing a little about the differences between Sunni and Shiite doesn't go nearly far enough. Yet in addition to good political reasons for becoming better educated concerning the nature of Islam, the spiritual heritage of Islam is rich with wisdom and inspiration: Why would we want to deny ourselves full access to such spiritual treasure?

In short, it seems to me that it is our responsibility as 21st century human beings, and certainly as Unitarian Universalists who claim to draw upon a wide range of sources in our search for truth and meaning, to know more about the diverse historical heritage and contemporary reality of Islam.

So, this morning I offer a brief journey through some of the diversity within Islam – admittedly more breadth than depth, in order to give us just a taste which I hope will serve as an invitation to your own further explorations, an open door to this large and interesting world called Islam. And we can begin as noted scholar Carl Ernst begins his fine book *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*, by stating what should be obvious, but sadly for many is not so obvious... that not all Muslims are the same! Yes, they share certain basic faith presuppositions – in one God and Muhammad as his prophet, in the Qur'an as the word of God and as a source of wisdom and direction, in the duties of prayer and charity and pilgrimage. But though there are these common and essential threads, there is diversity as well; and there is no single centralized authority (like a Pope) to try to impose uniformity of belief and practice.

To begin with, Islam is diverse geographically and culturally. Arabs, close to the roots of Islam, guardians of Mecca, make up only 15% of the world's Muslims. The largest populations of Muslims live in Indonesia and in India and Pakistan. There are significant minority populations of Muslims in Europe, ten million altogether, and some five million Muslims in the United States. Indeed, as Ernst points out – and this it seems to me is awfully important to realize – there hasn't been a separate "Muslim world" for hundreds of years. Islam has been part of European, Asian, and African history for a long, long time. American history too: 15% of the West African slaves brought to America were Muslims.

Why does it matter to remind ourselves of the geographical range of Islam? For the most important reason that we may then be less likely to think of Muslims and Islam as "other" –

rather, we will come to understand that Muslims and Islam are and long have been woven into the fabric of the world we share.

Next, Islam is not only widely spread geographically, but the nature of Islam and the place of Islam in society varies from nation to nation, culture to culture.

For example, we can look at one often controversial practice, the practice of veiling and how it varies from place to place, culture to culture. I don't have to remind you that this is a practice that for many non-Muslims represents the extreme oppression of women in the Islamic world. Yet the Qur'an says nothing about veiling in so many words. It simply encourages modesty of dress for both men and women; and this has been variously interpreted over time and in different cultures. In some times and places, historically and today, veiling has indeed been used as a tool of oppression – quite dramatically as we have seen in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

This said, many Muslim women even in more or less otherwise secular societies wear some form of veil or headscarf quite by choice, and others don't. And you probably know that from place to place the style of dress and veiling often has far more to do with local customs (for better or worse) than with specific injunctions from the Qur'an – so, styles range from headscarves in many parts of the world to the full length chador in Iran or burqa in Afghanistan. (And like just about everything else in the world today, you can see – and buy – a full line of Islamic clothing on the web.)

Looking beyond clothing to the role of women in Islamic societies, there is no question but that there has been and is terrible oppression in some Islamic cultures – but not only is such oppression hardly limited to Islam, it is also not the whole story within Islam. Women had full property rights beginning in early Islamic history, at least in theory, centuries before such rights were common in the west. Muslim women have risen to the professional classes in many Muslim and also in largely non-Muslim societies; and whereas we have yet to elect a woman president of the United States, Islamic Pakistan elected Benazir Bhutto over a decade ago. Finally, Ernst quotes the Qur'an, making clear that “God specifically regards the acts of women and men as of equal worth: ‘I do not neglect the deeds done by any of you, whether man or woman; the one of you comes from the other’ (3:195).”

So the picture is complex and varied – diverse – when it comes to the role and position of women in Islam and in various Islamic societies. Not all good. Not all bad. But diverse to be sure. And, it should also be noted, still evolving.

How about the role of religion and politics within Islam? Is it true that there is a single understanding among Muslims as to what the role of Islam should be in government and politics? Hardly. Though most Muslims would affirm that their faith ought to inform their social and political and ethical lives, this would also be true for Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus. This said, though, there are diverse views as to the role that Islam should officially play in a nation's political life. We have only to look at the map with some rudimentary knowledge of the political realities in each Muslim-majority nation to realize that there is remarkable diversity when it comes to Islam and the state: compare Turkey with Saudi Arabia with Egypt with Jordan with Iran with Pakistan with Indonesia with Malaysia.

And there is not just diversity, there is active debate among many Muslims as to what the role of Islam ought to be politically and in what ways Islam is compatible with democracy.

Along these same lines, we've heard much in recent years about shari'a or Islamic law; and much of what we hear in the mainstream media would suggest that there is a single Islamic

understanding of shari'a. But there is a long history of commentary and discussion and varied interpretation within Islam as to how the principles in the Qur'an and in the Hadith (the sayings of and stories about Muhammad) ought to be applied when it comes to criminal and civil law and the organization of the state.

Jihad is another concept often misunderstood in the West and somewhat variously interpreted within the diverse communities of Islam. To begin with, translating jihad as "holy war" is an over-simplification. A more accurate translation is "struggle." And what is considered to be the *primary* jihad, as you may know, is the individual's internal struggle to live according to the precepts of Islam, to live a good and decent life. It is the *secondary* meaning which has to do with taking up arms to defend the faith and the community against outside attack. It is of course this secondary meaning which has been twisted by extremists to justify suicide bombings and other forms of indiscriminate violence.

It is no excusing such violence to say that much of it is in the context of real or perceived oppression and injustice and Western colonialism. And it is no excusing such violence to note that extremist Muslims are hardly the only ones to engage in indiscriminately violent behavior on behalf of ideals, whether religious or otherwise.

Next, and perhaps most central, there is diversity within Islam when it comes to spiritual understandings of Islam's religious precepts.

To begin with there are the various sects within Islam, about which we by now all know at least something, though as I noted earlier, probably not enough: Sunni, Shiites, Wahhabis. And then the mystical strain within Islam, Sufism, historically sometimes embraced by religious authorities and sometimes persecuted by religious authorities. (It is worth noticing, by the way, that if you are among the millions who have been reading and appreciating the poetry of Rumi or the stories of Nasrudin presented by Idries Shah, then you have been breathing the air of Sufism, which means you have been breathing the air of Islam.)

Then we have the Qur'an itself. Everyone knows that the Qur'an is central and sacred for all Muslims. Yet do we realize that not all Muslims today or historically have agreed that the Qur'an is to be read completely literally? Do we know that there is a long history of commentary and debate about the meanings of passages in the Qur'an? Indeed, as liberal lesbian Muslim Irshad Manji (did you know there could be such a person?) writes in her book *The Trouble with Islam Today*, the Qur'an is far too self-contradictory for an intelligent person to take everything it says literally:

We have to own up to the fact that the Koran's message is all over the bloody map. Compassion and contempt exist side by side.... Hopeful and hateful verses stand only lines away from each other.

This means, for example, as she further points out, that Osama Bin Laden has justified his every action through selective reading of verses from the Qur'an, such as those which enjoin death to infidels; yet we also find passages like this one, often quoted in recent years, which affirm that religious pluralism is God-given: "For each [people] We have appointed a Divine Law and a way. Had God willed, He could have made you one community... So vie with one another in good works."

Finally, overarching all of these diverse dimensions of Islam, we need to know that there is a spectrum of diversity which transcends the variations in practice from culture to culture, which transcends even the usual historical divisions and sects. It is a spectrum which ranges from liberal reformist to centrist traditional Islam to more conservative strains, and over the edge, violent fundamentalist extremists.

Surveying this spectrum of diversity within Islam, Carl Ernst makes a critical point. He writes that to the extent that non-Muslims, particularly in the West, blindly and unthinkingly accept the lie (which is too often the mainstream media portrayal or at least implication) that fundamentalist Islam, violent Islam, is the only Islam, we are aiding and abetting the extremists. Which is – it hardly needs saying – the last thing we want to be doing, since these extreme elements pose a real and present danger, even though they are by no means representative of the whole of Islam.

So, as I affirmed at the outset, all this means that our primary role in relation to Islam as non-Muslims *must be* to inform ourselves about the complex and diverse traditions and realities of Islam. We need not and ought not gloss over the failings within Islam, the prejudices within Islam, the history of imperialism and violence within Islam, or the current tragedy and threat of extremist terrorism claiming the mantle of Islam. Indeed we *must* understand all of this too. But at the same time we also need to recognize that these things are not the whole story of Islam, anymore than the failings, prejudice, and violence in the history and contemporary realities of Christianity and of the West generally, are the whole story of Christianity and the West.

Let me conclude by repeating some of this morning's second reading from Seyyed Hossein Nasr's book, *The Heart of Islam*, a reading that reminds us that in the midst of the outward diversity of Islam, of Christianity, of all the religions, humanists and secularists too, beats a deeper heart of unity:

It is for Muslims to heed the call from the heart of Islam and live an ethical and spiritual life accordingly, but it is also for those in the West who seek meaning in their lives to turn to their own center and to realize that in coming to know better the heart of Islam they may gain more than greater insight into another religion and civilization; they may gain greater insight into their own heart and soul. The heart of any religion is none other than that single, universal Truth that resides at the heart of all authentic religions and that is itself the foundation of the religion of the heart.

So may it be.

Benediction

Whatever our spiritual path,
May we know that all paths are woven together,
That all people are woven together,
That all life is one fabric, one tapestry,
And that we all weave and tend the threads... and tend each other.
So may it be.