

“We” Includes Muslims

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Readings

from the *Hadith* (sayings of Mohammed)

Abdullah said, "When we prayed behind the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, we used to say, 'Peace be upon Gabriel and Michael, peace upon so-and-so.'

"Then the Prophet turned to us and said, 'In fact, God *is* peace. So when any one of you prays, then say, "All benedictions are for God; and so are all prayers and all that is good. Peace upon you, O Prophet, and the mercy and blessing of God. Peace upon us, and upon all genuine servants of God," for if you say this, it will reach out to every true servant of God in the heavens and the earth..." "

from *American Islamophobia*, by Khaled A. Beydoun

Enslaved Muslims resisted the slave code and rebelled against slave masters before the United States was a sovereign nation. They built roads and railroads, cities and state buildings, without compensation...

This country is where Muslim immigrants were pushed and pulled to a new land to piece together better lives for their children, lured by dreams that were deferred by discrimination – and still realized despite that discrimination... (yet) By voting, marching, and struggling to exercise a religion demonized by law and policy, these same Muslim Americans bring to life the civil liberties that although enshrined in the Constitution, have been systematically denied them.

This is the land where we buried our sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers, and where, *insha'Allah* – God willing – we will one day bury Islamophobia deep in the very soil that spawned it.

Sermon

As some of you have no doubt noticed, over the years I often preach about peace on Memorial Day. Why? For the simple reason that we all hope for the day in some future beyond our lives when there will be no additional young men and women to mourn because they lost their lives in war. I, for example, would have loved to have what would now be my 95-year-old Uncle Bob still in our lives, perhaps along with his children, my

cousins who were never to be, since Bob was killed in the Battle of the Bulge near the end of World War II.

Bob wrote many letters home, as I've mentioned on other occasions. And in at least one of those letters he reflected on how well he and his buddies were getting along though they were from different religious backgrounds: Protestant, Catholic and Jewish – which is what passed for great diversity in those days.

Bob further mused in the same letter that, inspired by this, after the War he might want to go into the ministry to further the cause of brotherhood, and therefore of peace.

Knowing this, I've long felt that I'm carrying as best I can at least a little bit of Uncle Bob's legacy.

Of course if Bob suddenly found himself in the year 2018 he would be amazed at the wider range of diversity, religious and otherwise, that is now commonplace in our nation. But I'm pretty certain he would be just as committed to the task of finding common ground and mutual understanding – peace – in the midst of that diversity; and I expect would join us in celebrating that diversity.

A religious diversity that is, drawing closer to today's theme (and needless to say) diversity that includes those whose faith is Islam. And preaching about peace these days must include reflections about Islam, for reasons I hardly need to name.

To begin with, one of the first things we should note and underline is that Muslims have been part of the tapestry of religious diversity in our nation since colonial times, since a significant percentage of Africans who came to this land in chains were practicing Muslims.

Tragically, though, also from the very beginning of European and African settlement on this continent, Muslims were in general not considered by those with power and privilege to be an acceptable part of our religious tapestry. Often, then, African slaves who were Muslim had to pretend to be Christian, even as many of them kept as best they could Muslim practices of prayers five times a day, the Ramadan fast, and so on.

Khaled Beydoun, in *Islamophobia*, describes how one enslaved Muslim, Omar Ibn Said, would perform his morning prescribed ablutions and then upon arriving at the cotton fields would say his prayers and use the movements of bending to pick the cotton as simulation of the required prostrations for daily prayers. I find this so deeply poignant, moving, and beautiful.

Again, all while outwardly in other ways pretending to be Christian.

And listen to this. Perhaps some of you knew this, but I've just learned it, from Beydoun's book: From 1790 to 1944, Muslim immigrants were by law prohibited from becoming naturalized American citizens. You heard that right. It was not until 1944 that Muslim immigrants could become citizens.

To put it another way, Muslim bans of one form or another are nothing new in our "land of the free."

Now, there has been progress, which should be named. The law did change in 1944. And the immigration act of 1965 allowed for much more diverse waves of

immigration, leading not only to a much larger Muslim population in the United States, but also larger Hindu and Buddhist populations, and greater ethnic diversity among immigrants in our nation more generally. Which many of us view as a great thing, creating a rainbow of an ever wider spectrum of color and background and belief. Beautiful rainbow!

But as we know only too well, not all Americans agree. Though there is a thread of increasing diversity over the course of American history, there is an accompanying thread of intolerance and even hate – some of which has long been directed towards Muslims.

An American Muslim population that, interestingly, is itself probably the most diverse of all the major religious faith groups: Represented are Muslims with backgrounds in South Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, as well as African American Muslims. Yet in spite of this, intolerant and ignorant souls see Muslims as a monolithic Arab “other” – which is a long way from the truth.

As we know as well, the Muslim world is also diverse theologically (like all faith traditions), ranging from liberal to conservative to fundamentalist; Sunnis and Shiites, with diverse views represented in both those groups; and within all of these categories the mystical dimension of Islam known as Sufism.

There is no such thing, in short, as a standard issue Muslim! No more than there is a standard Christian or Jew or Buddhist and so on.

Yet for those who hate and fear, “Muslim” is a single category, and a dangerous one, every Muslim a potential terrorist.

Are there Muslim terrorists? Of course!

But not all (in fact a sliver of a tiny minority) Muslims are terrorists. And not all terrorists are Muslims.

Well, with all this in mind, we are clearly in need of better and deeper inter-religious understanding; and we are in need of a good working understanding as well of the nature of what has come to be called “Islamophobia.”

Here again I’ll draw from Beydoun’s book.

He teaches us that there are two primary categories of Islamophobia.

First is what he calls “private Islamophobia”: “...the fear, suspicion, and violent targeting of Muslims by private actors.”

There are plenty of recent examples to choose from. You may recall the shooting of three Muslim students at their apartment complex in Chapel Hill. Or perhaps you remember that just after 9/11 a Sikh gas station owner was shot and killed in Arizona because the shooter thought he looked Muslim, the shooter proclaiming, “I stand for America all the way!”

We have observed burnings of Mosques, and communities preventing mosques from being built in the first place.

All of this because Muslims are thought by too many to be “other” than some supposedly pristine idea of what an American looks like, often with huge overlaps of racism thrown in for good measure.

Beydoun also places in the category of “private Islamophobia” the hate-mongering towards Muslims apparent in various news outlets and web sites.

The second category of Islamophobia is what Beydoun calls “structural Islamophobia,” which is “the fear and suspicion of Muslims on the part of government institutions and actors.”

Among the most recent examples are of course the attempted Trump administration Muslim travel bans, immigration crackdowns, promises of a “Muslim registry” and so on. But lest liberals get too smug, Beydoun is quite clear that “The Trump administration should not be viewed as a marked departure or outlier, but rather as a more transparent and brazen step in a progression that has been, in great part, enabled by the stated war-on-terror aims and programs of the previous two administrations,” since both Bush and Obama enacted or continued programs targeting Muslim communities for surveillance of various kinds.

Not to mention that, as I’ve already noted, state-sanctioned Islamophobia dates to the founding of our republic.

Well, Beydoun goes into quite a bit of detail about both private and structural Islamophobia, along with the interrelationship of the two.

But we get the point.

What then are we to do? As individuals... and as a faith community.

First step is always education and consciousness raising.

As for me, I’ve studied Islam for years, so I probably know more about the faith itself than the average American. And that’s a start, to develop a nuanced understanding of a tradition that is not our own, and more than that to have discovered along the way that my own spiritual path is enriched by Islam in general and Sufism in particular.

But I’m also aware that over a lifetime I’ve absorbed from the general culture, probably in all sorts of ways I’m not even aware of, the idea that somehow Islam is not mainstream American – as Christianity and Judaism are.

And even our own Unitarian Universalist “Principles and Purposes” subtly reinforce this view. The “Sources” section of our “Principles and Purposes” names among the seven sources yes, “wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life” – and this is a good and beautiful thing, certainly implicitly including Islam. But then our Sources go on to name separately “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”

Well, I get that this source made its way into our “Principles and Purposes” because historically Unitarian Universalism grew most directly out of the so-called Judeo-Christian stream of religion. But the unfortunate implication is that all the other religious traditions are subtly suggested to be second tier, less important.

We must grow further in our understanding of who we are as Unitarian Universalists, just as we must grow in our understanding of who gets to be called and considered an American.

So – again, first step: education and consciousness raising. Our faith calls us to this. We are also called to it as American citizens.

Next step is speaking up and speaking out – both in relation to any expression of private Islamophobia and in relation to government policies of structural Islamophobia. And this fall we will have the opportunity to vote for candidates who would help us progress towards a more genuinely inclusive and accepting United States of America, as well as to offer financial support if we can to candidates in other parts of the country who share this same desire.

Well, all this said, Beydoun introduces the sobering reminder that because Islamophobia has such deep roots in the soil of our nation, one election won't by itself meet the challenge. So just as we must be in relation to the often interrelated issues of racism, gender inequalities, and other forms of discrimination and hate, we are called to lifetimes of work, each in our own way, to create this better nation, this better world. It is good work! And as I often say in one context or another, how else would we want to live but to be engaged in such life work? Work that is often as simple as a kind or understanding word, naming hate when we see it, or voting or an email to one of our elected representatives.

Well, there is no better way to draw towards a conclusion this morning than to return to the affirmation with which Khaled Beydoun concluded *Islamophobia*, an affirmation that in spite of the history of hate and discrimination against Muslims, full inclusion and freedom can be realized. Here is his final sentence once again:

This is the land where we buried our sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers, and where, *insha'Allah* – God willing – we will one day bury Islamophobia deep in the very soil that spawned it.

Finally, then, we who are not Muslims, in the spirit of my Uncle Bob and all those who over time have fought for justice, can and must be the allies of those who continue to be treated as other than full citizens... for “we” does include all of us. What better way to use this month of Ramadan, even for us non-Muslims, than through the sort of spiritual and ethical reflection to which Muslims are called during this holy month. It is reflection as UUs and as human beings which can lead us to re-commit to the good and essential task, in the spirit of the charitable works Ramadan encourages, of helping and welcoming all those in whatever ways we can who have been excluded from full American citizenship.

More broadly, by speaking and spreading this message of inclusion, that “we” includes Muslims (and everyone!), we will be among those creating more peace not only in our nation, but among all the peoples and nations of the world.

So may it be.