

The Heart of Islam
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Readings

The opening “sura” (chapter) of the Qur’an, as translated by Michael Sells. It is the most often recited sura of the Qur’an. It has sometimes been compared in spirit and meaning to the Christian Lord’s Prayer:

In the name of God
the Compassionate the Caring
Praise be to God
lord sustainer of the worlds
the Compassionate the Caring
master of the day of reckoning
To you we turn to worship
and to you we turn in time of need
Guide us along the road straight
the road of those to whom you are giving
not those with anger upon them
not those who have lost the way

From *The Heart of Islam*, by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a Muslim scholar of Iranian birth, educated at M.I.T. and Harvard, formerly a professor at Tehran University, and then professor of Islamic studies at George Washington University in Washington, D.C.:

...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. It is in the achievement of this task that both the formal aspect and the inner message of Islam as well as those of other religions can come to our aid as can nothing else in this world. Of special importance is the inner message, for this message is none other than the universal truth that was placed by God in the hearts of all human beings and that stands at the center of all heavenly revelations.

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...

Sermon

One Thursday about forty-five years ago I sat with dozens of others in the Quaker meeting house in Haverford, Pennsylvania. We were gathered for what is called Fifth Day Meeting, the Thursday morning college meeting for worship.

It was in the midst of the Vietnam War – and the United States had just invaded Cambodia. The vice-president of Haverford at the time, Steve Cary, rose, the spirit moving him to speak out of the silent meeting. He asked, as I recall, two questions:

“What am *I* meant to do? What are *we* meant to do?”

He was, we could say, seeking guidance from what Quakers call the inner light, God’s spirit speaking within each one of us. And as he sought this guidance for himself, he was at the same time modeling for us this seeking of guidance.

That moment carried extraordinary impact for me. Here was someone who I respected who didn’t know what to do, but who was seeking out of deepest sincerity to discover what he *should* do, what would be morally right for him – and for us – to do in relation to the larger, seemingly overwhelming, political events of the day. It was impressive.

Equally impressive, though, are those many moments when, in the course of my ministry, I sit with someone seeking answers to some real, often urgent, often personal life question. It might be about what to do in relation to another person, or it might be about what direction to take in life; it might be what we would call a practical question, or it might be what we would consider a moral or ethical question... or it could well be some complex blend of the practical and ethical.

But the basic questions at root are almost always the same: What should I do? What should we do? What would be best for me and for others in some situation? What would be the *right* thing to do?

Well, if we consider ourselves to be moral beings, the effort that we expend as we struggle to discover what we should do... and then do it, is universal. Muslims would call *jihad*.

If this sounds surprising in today’s charged political and religious environment, we must be reminded that *jihad* simply and profoundly means “struggle”. Effort or struggle of any kind, but in its religious context having first and primarily to do with the sort of *moral* and *spiritual* effort or struggle that is at the heart of Islam... as it is at the heart of every spiritual or religious tradition.

Yes, for Muslims *jihad* is also the word used to describe war undertaken to defend the community of faith; but traditionally this is understood to be the secondary meaning of *jihad*. The tragic reality today is that so-called radical Islamists have taken this secondary meaning to the extreme, indeed perverted its meaning to their own political ends, and in the process violated in the extreme other central teachings of Islam relating to justice and the value of each human life, whether Muslim or non-Muslim.

Today, though, my intention is not to explore this vitally important question of how the so-called *jihadists* of extremist, radical Islam, have twisted the religion they

claim to represent. There are reasons both religious and political as well as no doubt psychological for how they have become who they have become. But it seems to me that prefatory to such an exploration, or to looking at what we would consider terrible human rights abuses in Islamic nations such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, must first come the effort to understand Islam at its best, not at its worst; to understand, as we heard Seyyed Hossein Nasr put it, that the heart of Islam is the Islam of the heart.

Back, then, to *jihad*.

Mohammed himself clarified the two levels of meaning of *jihad* in an often retold story from the early years of the Muslim community.

Mohammed had gathered around him a small community of believers in Mecca in the years following his receipt (as he experienced it) of the first revelations of the *Qur'an* in the year 610. Before long, though, relations between this new community and the power elite of Mecca deteriorated to the point at which Mohammed and his followers accepted an invitation in 622 from the leaders of the city of Yathrib to settle there, in the city that became known as Medina. Two years after this move there was a battle between the Meccans and the Muslim community of Yathrib, and, though outnumbered, the Muslims won. This was a physical battle to be sure – a *jihad* – to defend the community of faith; and historically it is understood as a moment critical to the survival of this new, still small and relatively fragile community.

Yet, important though this battle was, as the fighters returned from battle, Mohammed affirmed that they were returning from the *lesser jihad* to continue the *greater jihad*.

In other words, they were returning from temporary physical battle or struggle to defend their faith, to the continuing struggle of the community and of each individual to live rightly and justly... returning to the inner battle or inner defense against those forces in the world and in ourselves which tend to draw us away from living rightly, justly, generously, compassionately.

I expect this sort of struggle may have a familiar ring to many if not all of us, however we might define our faith or philosophy of life.

Muslims view this inward *jihad* as striving to live according to God's law. The word "muslim" itself simply means, as you likely know, "one who submits." And the word "islam" means "submission" – at the same time that it also suggests the peace (*salaam*) that comes from submitting to or following God's law.

Now, if this idea of "submission" sounds foreign or authoritarian to those of us who are not Muslim, we would do well to remember other ways in other traditions of expressing very much the same idea: Christians sometimes pray, "not my will, but Thine." Taoists teach that we ought to align ourselves with the flow of the Tao, the Way of life. Put in the most general terms we might speak of striving to live according to ethical principles; or as Unitarian Universalists, seeking to live according to our seven Principles.

All this said, no matter what system of ideas and teachings or what metaphor we use, we all know that it is far easier said than done to live in this spirit; and this is as true for Muslims as for anyone else. Hence effort, struggle, *jihad*.

It helps, therefore, to have guides along the way of our striving, our struggles to live ethically, justly, compassionately.

The primary guide for Muslims is of course the *Qur'an*; and a second important guide is the *Hadith*, the collection of the sayings of Mohammed and stories about Mohammed, who is revered (not worshipped) by Muslims as an exemplar of how a Muslim, how a human being, should live.

Now, we might well disagree with this or that prescription within the *Qur'an*, or in the *Hadith*, or within the vast body of Islamic tradition and law – *Sharia*. So it is good to keep in mind, first, that Muslims themselves have such disagreements among themselves (Islam is a highly diverse community of faith, with many and varied strands); and good to keep in mind as well the larger Islamic religious vision of how an individual ought to behave in the world, and of how a just human community in which all are equal before God ought to be organized.

How, then, is an individual Muslim to live? This is of course a huge question. But we can begin by simply recalling what are considered to be the five “pillars” of Islam, principles and practices that characterize Islam and guide individual Muslims. And though *jihad* is not one of the pillars, the faithful use *jihad*, moral and spiritual effort, as they strive to live according to the pillars and to defend against whatever would distract one or tempt one away from that way of living, away from the “straight road” as the reading of the first *sura* of the *Qur'an* put it.

So:

The first pillar is the statement of faith, which is quite simply “There is no God but God, and Mohammed is his prophet (or Messenger).”

We could put this in more general terms and say that this statement of faith is a way of recognizing that our lives are governed by a larger moral and spiritual reality, not just by our personal whims.

The second pillar is the injunction to pray insofar as one is able five times a day. Though there are many varieties of prayer for Muslims, these five times a day prayers involve specific physical prostrations and recitations; they can be done wherever one happens to be. The intent? Quite simply, pausing to pray five times every day is meant to help one maintain that alignment with God and with God’s moral law.

The third pillar is the requirement of *zakat*, or charity. There are specific requirements relating to giving away each year a percentage of one’s wealth (2.5% to be precise); but more generally *zakat* is also expressed through every act of generosity and kindness to someone in need.

The fourth pillar is to undertake the fast of Ramadan each year – no food or drink from dawn to dusk throughout the month of Ramadan. This fast (which can be modified according to the needs of the old, the ill, the infirm, and for other reasons) is meant to enable one to turn one’s thoughts and intentions more completely toward God, toward

those who are less fortunate, and toward meditation upon how one is meant to live each day.

The fifth pillar is to make the pilgrimage, or *haj*, to Mecca once in one's lifetime if one is physically and financially able to do so. Yet another way of strengthening one's faith, and also of experiencing the power of the community of faith gathered for the same purpose in the same spirit.

All this said, the practices of the pillars, along with living according to the other prescriptions in the *Qur'an*, *Hadith*, and codified in Muslim tradition and law, could like any practices easily remain outward only. So, a deeper *jihad* is meant to suffuse all of these outward practices, a deeper effort to align oneself experientially with the divine reality, so that one will *want* to live accordingly, and not just do this or that because someone has told us to. In Islam, the Sufi mystics are for many among the primary exemplars of those who strive for this most deeply inward experience; but it is an experience open to all in one degree or another.

Further, though we might get the impression that with all these guides and prescriptions there is no room for free will here; the reality is that for Muslims as for those of most other religious traditions, free will is at the heart of the matter. For in the end, put most generally, it is for each of us to freely figure out how in our unique circumstances we can carry out the ethical principles we have been given or we have discerned... and more generally still, how we might live from our experience of the divine, our experience of the wholeness of the interconnected and interdependent human community and the community of all life.

Finally, I ought not leave us with the impression that Islam is in the end really not very different from other traditions or from our own Unitarian Universalism. There are of course many differences, requiring other sermons.

But in the living of our lives day to day, there is so much that most human beings share, whatever our tradition or background, as with good will we strive and struggle to live a good and decent life, to make challenging ethical decisions with as kind a heart as we can manage and according to principles of fairness and justice, asking each day questions: What am I meant to do? How shall I live? What are we meant to do? How shall we live?

Good enough questions, questions of the heart, questions never old as we begin a new year.

Ending, then, with a few more words – a challenge really – from Seyyed Hossein Nasr:

Nothing less than the wisdom and love of the religion of the heart can save us in a world torn apart by so much evil and selfishness.

So may it be.